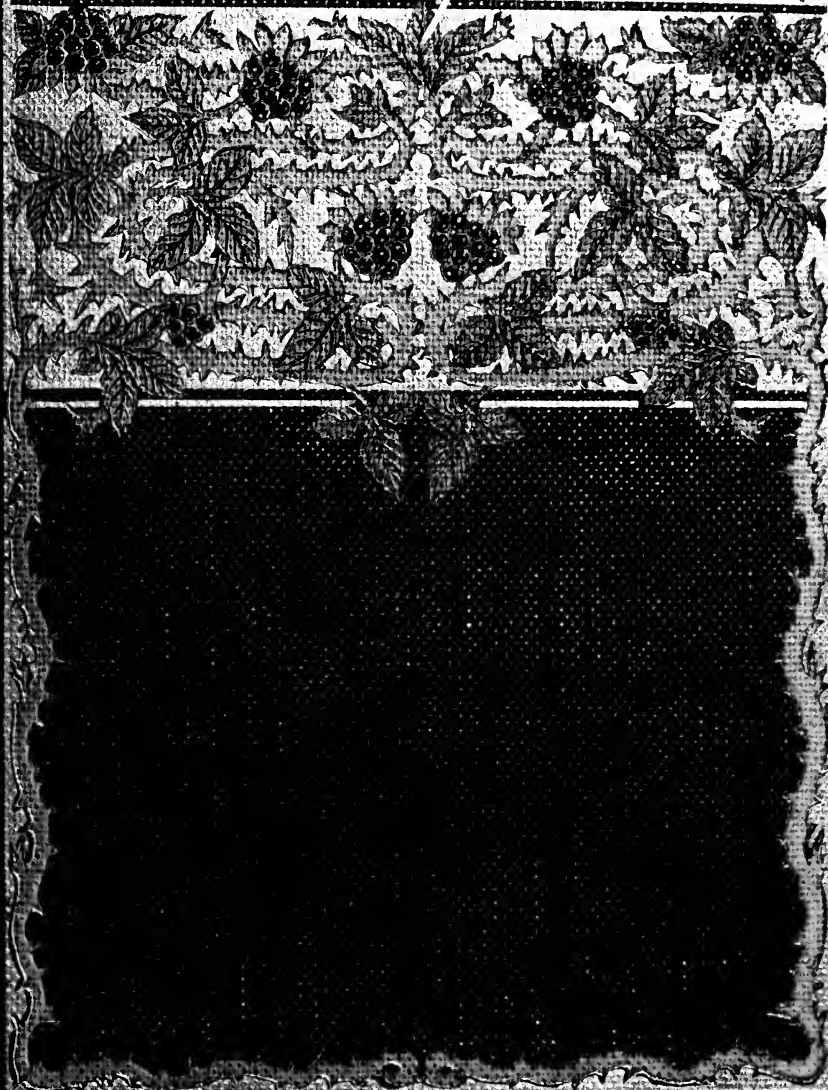


AS THE LIGHT LED



JAMES NEWTON BASKETT



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AS THE LIGHT LED

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AS THE LIGHT LED

BY

JAMES NEWTON BASKETT

AUTHOR OF "AT YOU-ALL'S HOUSE"

"Lead, kindly Light" — NEWMAN

New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

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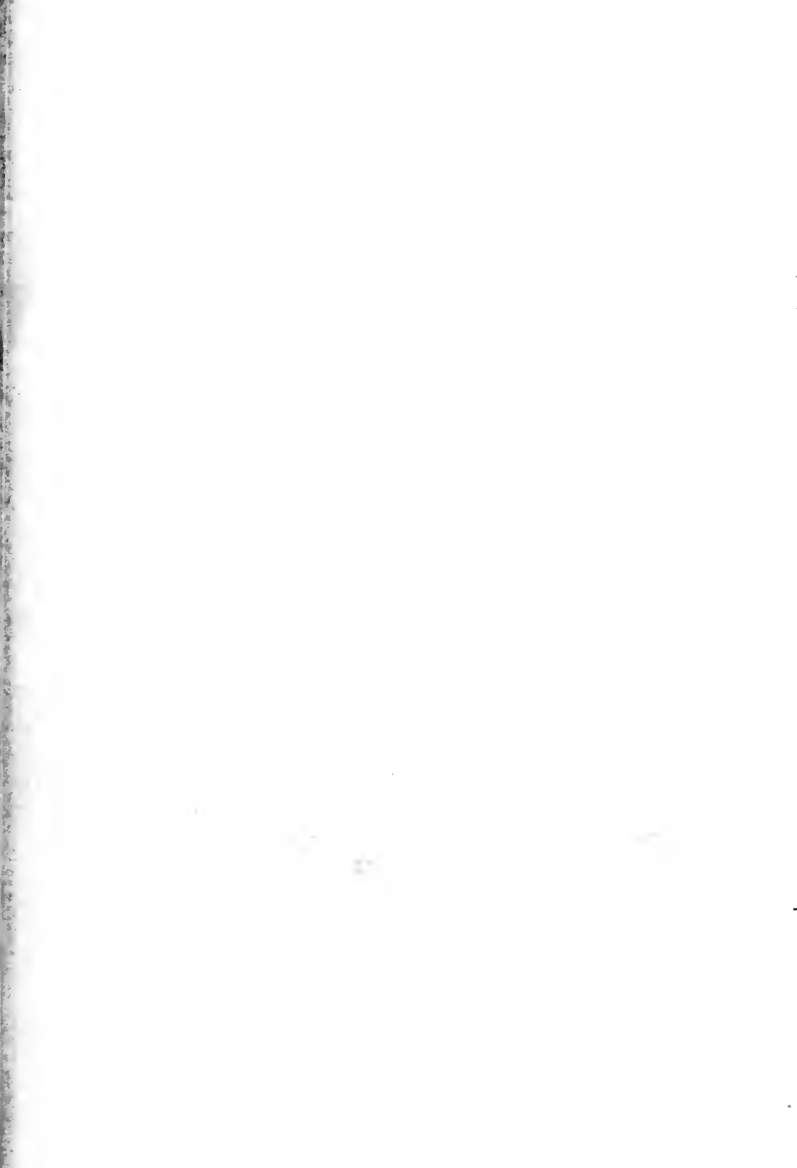
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TO
My Wife,
JEANNIE MORRISON,
MY HELPMET IN THIS
AND ALL THINGS

“Pshaw! . . . I’m not the stuff they make angels out of. . . . Oh, I’m the raw material, I reckon; but awfully raw, I tell you.”

AS THE LIGHT LED



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I

"I 'oves 'oo best, 'tause 'oo beat 'em all."

THEY had been boy and girl together, not schoolmates or next-farm neighbors but their homes were in the same region. Her father's house was far enough away to make the boy's visits not so frequent as to foster the familiarity which breeds contempt, yet they gave him an occasional little journey out of the humdrum of home lanes, and away from the monotonous sweep of the prairie's flat horizon.

Hers was rather a timber farm, located on the other side of Flint Creek, where the woods began to fringe out upon the treeless plain again; but his was high out eastward upon the prairie swell, several miles from water. From his place the wooded barrier between them

seemed only a brown level brush-stroke upon the sky's western margin.

Sometimes, when he was tired from his day's work afield, he watched the sun sink behind this border, which the distance made so velvety; and, if the day were clear, it looked to him as if the great glowing ball were lying down upon a cushion for its comfort. If it set in a bank of cloud or storm, it seemed to send up long streaming, reaching stripes, as if it waved a farewell to the sky, and stretched a last grasp at the day as it left it, or shot a rocket of distress as it sank.

When a child he had often sent her his goodwill upon the westering messenger, and he imagined that the beams, sometimes shot suddenly out from beneath a low-hung cloudy curtain, were answers to his greetings. Long after it was dreary at his place, he fancied the light was still cuddling somewhere in the brush near her and that it was cheery yet over there.

When he was seven and she was three, he was visiting at her house one day. She was sitting on a bench in the old, long porch, shouting to him, her elder brother, and some others, as they came toward her from a romp out in the

orchard. Suddenly Bent bantered the boys for a race to the baby; and, swinging their limp wool hats in their hands, they sped toward her. The child caught the jubilation of the race, and when Bent dropped first beside her, she grabbed him about the neck, laid the rose of her cheek against the tan of his, and said:—

“I ’oves ’oo best, ’tause ’oo beat ’em all.”

The act was an infant tribute to prowess, a bound here in babyhood of the heart which wants but does not weigh; of the body which asks but does not question. The boy felt his heart go to meet hers, so that the little girl stood ever after as his idol. As time went on, his reverence for her as a lisper grew as she became a lass; and though, out of the dawning to them of what the years might bring, there came eras of pure embarrassment, wherein their firmness and trust wavered a little, yet confiding companionship came anew and stayed, till some new revelation of each to self or other barred for a time again their ease and intimacy.

They were man and woman now, with a consciousness of much that the grown-up state must finally mean to them, if this continued. There

was the freedom from embarrassment which experience brings; but there came with all this a sort of proximity of hopes and aims, which, burdened sweetly with its own importance, persisted with a presage of a crisis down the line.

He could no longer ride up to her side as she left the stile at church, and, without a previous engagement or the lubricant of a commonplace, open a conversation right into the heart of things. When she responded to him now it was with a shy sort of confidence which admits so much yet defines so little. Yet never when they met did they fail to pick up the thread, which tended to bind them closer and closer, and give it a conscious snatch of greater strain, till, as either looked back at the skein of incidents, there came a delightful feeling of hopeless entanglement in this fibre of their fate. However, the ends of the filaments were free and floating yet, as the fray of a swirling gossamer in the autumn wind. Day by day these two felt that these frayed ends would meet sometime; and hold? or snap? and then? and then!

Nothing had ever strongly tried their attachment. Yet there was creeping now into the heart of each a sort of heaviness — a wondering,

at least — if the other was still holding true to the childish troth; a definite sort of mental distrust was abiding between them, along with a readiness to be equal to anything which an emergency might bring. But in their hearts they were lovers still.

II

"A splendid heathen, worthy of her salutary influences."

THOSE were days just after the Civil War. The belligerent spirit had scarcely settled in the arena of politics and sectional strife before it broke out with experienced tactics in another. It was the repetition of that old commonplace of history—a fanaticism in the interpretation of the scriptural teachings. Whatever position one took on the subject then, he trained himself to maintain it; and the intellectual tilts which followed were only too truly typed by the physical jousts of long ago. These sharpened the wits and edged the temper as the others had whetted the lance and pointed the sword. The spirit was now as then; and, while progress had done much, yet in milder form the same sentiment prevailed to-day which had swung the torch and driven the stake.

Bent Hickman was of a Methodist family

from a stock which had its traditions and prejudices dyed in fast and conspicuous colors. They went to church at "Prairie View Meetin' House," whose blunt spire glinted in sheer white for miles around on the plain. Here he had learned little, but had absorbed much of that prejudice which takes an arrogant form when the denomination happens to be the largest congregation in the region.

The shrine of Nannie Ditmer and her people nestled within a bend of Flint Creek near a salient angle where the swirl of the floods had cut out a deep pool well fitted for baptisms by immersion. Her church was that known to Bent and his people as Campbellites; but this title (as well as the word "denomination" applied to them) was scorned as sacrilegious by her folk and their kind. They named themselves "Christians" only; yet they did not always become loquaciously belligerent if they were called "The Disciples."

The assumption of these broad terms as peculiarly their own provoked from the sects (as they styled all other denominations) special and often combined, attacks: but this people, conscientiously believing that no salvation could

exist outside of their practice and peculiar faith, fought back with a courage and polemic skill which wrought conviction. The world likes a good fighter. The more the congregations of this persuasion grew, the better trained they became as combatants, till they stood well able not only to take care of themselves but to pass a little way over the borders of the enemy.

When the others saw the futility of aggression, they ceased strife somewhat, and began anew their onslaughts upon the world; but the defenders of the new faith, having tasted the sweets of strife, found fighting so profitable, that they kept it up, and appealed to the world largely from this point of view.

Nannie had been nurtured mid this clash of the creeds till she had absorbed into her soul all its combativeness, and had shrivelled her life and faith into the mere forms of dogma. Her zeal grew in the direction of trying to save others, not from the results of their wrong deeds so much as from the consequences of their own beliefs. So intense was the proselyting fervor, that her religious solicitude scarcely took in the foreign heathen, and tripped lightly

over the gutter at her feet. With all this she was a girl of the deepest conscientious sincerity, and her rectitude was as rigid as her prejudice.

Recently she had heard that Bent Hickman was rather lax in attendance at his church. In fact she knew that he was frequently at her own. But she thought *she* knew why that was — still — Something had been said about his being careless of religion generally, and that he had roughened some since he began “trading” and shipping stock to the city. She would like to see him reform of course; and it would be doubly agreeable if his reformation should denominationally run her way.

Bent was not “fast,” but he had something of the swagger of the man who knows or feels himself a good judge of stock, and has enjoyed the first delights of making a profit on it.

Perhaps, after all, the fascination which a reckless man has to the mind of an innocent girl is that he arouses her missionary effort. She may set him up as a splendid heathen worthy of her salutary influences.

There was a series of mixed motives in her mind, therefore, when Nannie promised Bent

that, on a following Sunday, she would go with him to a "revival" which was going on out at Prairie View church, and had gone on to fearful proportions, she was thinking. It was a bad state of affairs, she reflected, when, although there was no preaching at her own church, she could leave the "breaking of bread," and attend a meeting of shouting, groaning, and unimmersed unfortunates. But then she might save him from — from — and the ride in Bent's new buggy far out upon the prairie midst the early September gilt of the year in its second childhood, the long confidential conversation, the touch of shoulder to shoulder, and the tender interest in herself which a certain unregenerate always showed in frank face-light and hardy dash — all these tempted her.

She held the lines therefore with some trepidation and conscientious qualms while Bent closed the old gate which let them out of the "front pasture" into the "big road"; and she heard the bit of trace-chain clank against the slats with a sort of thrill as he slammed it to. She was as alert to the sound of his foot upon the iron step as were the horses, whose ears were set backward for the going signal. When

he was in and they had started, she nestled a little away from the rear wheel's familiar rim as it whirled so rapidly; and the curve of the road seemed almost to run toward them in graceful speed, at the brisk gait of the trotters.

There was a period of silence.

The resistance of the air made her feathers and ribbons flutter, and pulled from her farther shoulder her light wrap. The boy reached beyond her and replaced it with a very expressive tenderness.

III

"Just say I'm in the plain shirt-sleevedness of my everyday self."

"NANNIE, this is very good of you to leave your own church and come out here with me. I would not have asked it, but I was so hungry for a drive with you in this pretty weather. I bought this buggy in St. Louis—bought it thinking of you, and this long drive—you know."

"I'm glad to be with you, Bent," she said, using the lure of a commonplace as often a woman will. "I like the drive, and the buggy's nice, but—" (she turned her face squarely to him) "I was afraid, maybe, you thought you might—"

She hesitated. He gathered his lines and turned and looked at her with marked interest.

—"Might take me out here to-day and make a Methodist of me!"

His countenance fell in blank disappointment

and clouded a little, because Nannie had of late thrown out several denominational baits on her own hook and line, at which he had not bitten, but by which he had really been annoyed.

"I'd like to know what I'd think of making a Methodist of you for," he said, his voice showing his disappointment, because his mind had come to this drive by a very different route. She paled a moment. Why should he? unless he took the same interest in her that she did in him. Here was something ahead of her missionary zeal already. But his next remark set her normal again.

"You're such a proselyting little witch yourself that you think everybody's like you."

She stiffened slightly away from him, flushed, and was about to speak.

"Guess I'd better be a good Methodist myself before I go a-missionarying," he continued.

She let her shoulders drop and caught quickly at this straw of hope, allowing her indignation to slip until a more convenient season.

"But, Bent, you — you *are* a Methodist aren't you — a — a member, I mean?"

"Oh, I was baptized — sprinkled you'd call it — when I was a 'squaller' but —"

He gave his whip a sort of flip, leant outward and looked forward as if to see that the neck-yoke was the proper height. When he looked back, there was a gaze of eager interest in the girl's face.

"But," she said taking him up, "you don't consider that binding now, do — do — you, Bent?" and her breath loosened hopefully.

"Haw! haw! haw!" he laughed boisterously. "Well I'll be dogged! Blamed if I don't believe that rather than see me a Methodist you'd have me an unsaved sinner tottering on the edge of the 'bottomless,' if there was the least chance that I'd fall into that old washout in Flint Creek and be —"

"Oh, I don't care a thing about it," she said snappishly, turning away from him. "What made you think I did?"

"Oh, you haven't been hinting at me before this or nothing of that sort," he taunted still laughing; "and your face didn't show that you hoped that I did not consider my infant baptism binding! Oh no! Now, Nan, be honest; wasn't your little proselyting heart just jumping at the thought that maybe I might feel free, so that I could or would —?"

"No, it wasn't. What difference does it make to me, I'd like to know?"

Then *he* thought, "Yes, what difference?"

"Oh, just on general proselyting principles, I reckon," he said quite stiffly as he leant back.

There was a silence. He swept his whip back and forth above the horses till he struck a big black fly buzzing about. The insect whirled a moment in the air and fell upon the new clean oilcloth in the buggy bottom. He gazed at it as it lay there upon its back, and a glance up showed him that the girl's eyes also were fixed upon the same bright checks of color where the fly hummed with its wings and reached and struggled with its feet.

The boy began to repent a little of his part in the discussion. He had merely meant to dismiss the subject for the day—get it entirely out of the way of better things; but he had been too blunt. After all, it was well to have Nannie interested in him. He hadn't been so "all-fired" good of late, not saintly at any rate, he thought. If he was going to have any pleasure out of this day he must change his tactics.

He shot the butt of the whip at the fluttering fly, missed it and said :—

“Say, little girl!”

“Oh, you needn’t call me ‘little girl.’ I’m a woman now.”

Yes, that was true, he thought, and he could see a very poutward tenseness on the cheek near him. He made another shot at the fly, and she simply took her toe and scraped the insect a little nearer her side.

“I say, Nannie!”

There was no answer.

“Nannie!”

Silence still, except the strokes of the trotting feet upon hard prairie path. Anon they were consonant, again broken and jangled in their rhythm, as one stride was longer or shorter, slower or faster than the others. They were jarringly jumbled now.

Perhaps he could joke her into a good humor.

“Nannie, I know you hear me — know you’re not deaf though you make out you are. I know you think a good deal of my soul, but you wouldn’t want to see me a harping angel right now, would you?”

There was a series of rapid little nods of her head, as if consent knew that it was not sincere, but her face was still averted.

"Pshaw, Nan, you know you don't mean that. I'm not the stuff they make angels out of, any way. . . . Oh, I'm the raw material, I reckon," he added, after another silence, "but awfully raw, I tell you." He paused at intervals to note the effect of his foolery.

"How'd I look up there with wings, and a Jews'-harp, and a palm-leaf fan—and so raw that my angel skin would all be off?"

He saw her shoulder quiver slightly, and he thought that she was laughing. He reached a rough hand beyond her chin, and tried to turn the pretty face full up to him—expecting to see it break into smiles as it had so often done before; but it slipt resentfully out of his clasp.

"Why Nannie," he continued, pretending not to notice, "I've got to live a little longer with angels down here before I'd be fit to peep into the back door of heaven. I've been practising mighty close to one or two all my life, but I haven't learned much yet."

He put out his hand upon hers, but she snatched her fingers away, and, as a red flush

climbed her neck, he began to be a little frightened.

"I beg your pardon, Nannie. You are not mad at me, are you? I'm sorry that I said what I did. I can't say that I didn't mean it. It's awful nice to have you interested in a fellow's soul and all—I like you for it, but so you're interested in other things, birds and bugs and such. I saw you scrape the fly away from me a while ago, and when that flock of jays came scalloping down to the trees back at the edge of the timber, I saw you look. Why, I've seen you cry over a bird, Nan, which Dick or I had killed, and try to keep us from doing it again. I don't know that a fellow's any better than a bird, but I'd like some folks to think I was."

He was silent awhile, as if he doubted his logic.

"I reckon you are more interested in a fellow's soul than you are in a fly or bird but—it don't look much that way *now*. Of course you ought to be interested in anybody's soul, and I guess you are, but while a fellow feels that he'd like to be regarded as a little below the angels, yet he wants to be considered

also as a little above the beasts or the heathen. . . . Oh, dog-gone it! I don't know just what I want to say, or how to say it—but—you ought to leave my soul out of mind a minute—just say I haven't any—or—or—say I could slip it off and put it under the seat, as I do my Sunday coat, and—and—that I am in the plain shirt-sleevedness of my everyday self. . . . I don't reckon, though, that you could care for a fellow without any soul—and I don't want to be without any either, because *I* couldn't like *you* then as I do now. . . . There's something about you, Nannie, that wakes a fellow's soul mightily . . . and it takes a soul to like you as you should be liked."

The girl had looked down at the whirling spokes, and their shimmer had half hypnotized her in this sullen mood. The hum of the new tires over the smooth prairie soil, without grate of pebble, jolt of stone or jar of root, and the delightful yielding and resilience of the easy springs had no tendency to rouse her. But at the hint of her awakening his soul, she had turned to the fly again, which, still flat on its back, was spinning round and round with one wing crumpled.

"I don't reckon," he continued, "that I could ask you to be interested in this great hulk of a body of mine—just it, but dogged if there oughtn't to be something between the soul and body which you could hit a little harder some way. . . . Say, Nannie, I'm awful glad you're saved—that you are so dead sure about it, you know, and enjoy it so much, but it wouldn't make a blamed bit of difference to me if you were not; I'd just love all there is of you, I don't care if you'd been bowing down to Baal. I didn't ever ask any questions, didn't know enough to consider, when I first began—don't know enough yet, and don't want to know."

She reached down and turned the buzzing fly over on its feet, and watched it try to crawl up the slick patent-leather dash-board and fall back. He saw, in her bosom's rise and fall, a sigh which he could not hear above the hum and clatter, and he noted that the cheek next him was not drawn so tensely now.

"Why, Nannie, I've been counting on this day, as I said, and could hardly wait. You and I've been going together since we were children, and we loved each other and bore each other's faults a little then. Do you re-

member the night of the spelling-match at Hucker's Grove, when you and I were on the floor together in the 'a-r-e-the-plural-of-am', and the 'a-i-r-the-fluid-we-breathe' part; and — and — when I missed, you missed, too — a-purpose, that I might catch myself, and stay by you? They all said, 'Nan Ditmer missed a-purpose,' and you said you 'didn't care.' It isn't that I want you to be wrong with me yet, to miss still to keep me by you — no — no, not that; but can't you give me a chance to catch myself again? Why, from the time you put your baby arms about my neck when I beat them all running to you, I've never loved another woman, and now I'm twenty-two and you're eighteen — and I don't believe you've loved any one else . . . unless — unless — it's lately."

At the fancy even of what this might mean, his voice broke, and he looked away a moment, but soon turned back, putting the lines in his right hand, thus setting his face a little more toward her.

She had lost the fixed stare at the wheels, and had her head a little more toward him, but her eyes were on her hands which

lay crossed resignedly upon her lap. She reached forward, picked up the crawling fly, smoothed its crumpled wing between her fingers, brought it nearer to her eyes, and pinched from the uninjured wing a notch which matched that made by the whip-stroke upon the other. Then she tossed the insect into the air, and it flew off slowly.

While both were watching it as it disappeared, a prairie grouse whirred up noisily from the roadside, and the horses shied out of the beaten track till the buggy jolted upon the hummocks or "nigger-heads" of the virgin sod. Here other birds sprang up explosively and went away in alternate flaps and sailings, till finally one flushed beneath the feet of the trotters, and they were off. But the boy knew these colts, having broken them, and knew himself in this realm, at least; so he sawed the bits through their mouths, bent their bowed necks first one way then the other, till he had taken the dash out of them, and they were soon going in a spirited but level gait upon the smooth road again, where with a cool, graceful mastery he was guiding them anew with his single right hand.

IV

"Why, it's a funny thing that a fellow should grow jealous of his own soul, isn't it?"

THE incident had aroused the girl. She had turned toward the boy as he struggled with the hard mouths, though she had never a thought of fright. It was a thrilling thing to sit in such a situation, so secure, and feel all fear swept away by a hand like that. She was back instantly in her babyhood. If she had been in the realm of the spiritual for a while, she was bowing at the shrine of matter now.

When Bent looked up again her profile was visible and restful.

"Since we've been grown, Nannie," he resumed, as if the incident were nothing, "I never told you that I loved you, and — and — I thought that as a man, I ought — ought to let you know that I'm living my love yet as I've always lived it — as you used to live yours.

But of late your talk has been so chiding and religious, as if you'd forgotten the past and didn't care so much for me now here as in the hereafter. Why, it's a durned funny thing that a fellow should grow jealous of his own soul, isn't it?"

Before she could control herself she turned a shocked countenance toward him; and his face, struggling with its deep earnestness, held her. Her hands had fallen, crossed in her lap again, as a sort of sign of helpless yielding, and he put his free palm across them as if he would pinion her in this attentive mood.

"Look at me, little girl! Why, I never talked to you so long in my life, with your face hid like that. You don't intend that all these years shall count for nothing, do you? I'm glad you love your church and all these higher things. I wish I could also, but I've had no room in my narrow heart for anything but you. Nothing could live there in peace till I know that you are there to stay, and then — why, I was going to tell you this to-day, as I have; and I hoped Nannie that — that — you — Why, I'm sorry you hate me so and turn your face from me!"

His voice would hold no longer. His counte-

nance, distorted, fell, and he gazed toward the buggy bottom where a tear spattered on the bright cloth.

"Why, Bent," she said, her face toward him now, her fingers lightly on his sleeve, "I *was* vexed at you that you should sneer at my zeal in the true path and my interest in your soul. I was silent long, because at first you deserved it, sir, and later because I enjoyed it: it was so sweet to hear you plead. You will forgive me, won't you? A woman's soul hungers for that sort of thing sometimes. I've never had it—never been wooed, you know. I was just won from babyhood. I've spent my whole life for you—you've been my master; and when this something gave me this little spell of power—it was so sweet to have it over you."

The boy's head hung sullenly toward the whip-socket in front and to the right of him, and he was silent.

"You don't mind, do you, Bent? . . . Why, let me tell you how brief it was: I was weakening when you said it took a soul to love me right, and when you drew the reins so well back there upon the horses, and put your great self forth so easily, you mastered me again as well

as them; and when you held them in single-handed, I felt so safe beside you. Why, you silly goose, you'll be jealous of your right arm directly, for I like it."

He started to lift his face, but he gathered the reins a little tighter as he worked them nervously back between his fingers.

"But," she continued, "I ought not to like one side of you more than the other, and one side should not be behind the other—else you will spin round and round, as did the crippled horse-fly which you struck. I can't stand a one-sided thing, and —"

"So you pinch pieces out of them to even them up," he muttered.

She hesitated a moment at his thrust, for she was evidently on the defensive now.

"Why, yes—sometimes."

"Any of my wings too long?" he asked.

"No," she said, "but couldn't one of them be too short and need growing or stretching a little?"

He gave a restless little move as if he felt that she was coming back to sermonizing again, and he meant to resent it when she broke out:—

"Bent, you spoke of me not caring for you so much here now as in the hereafter. Why can't you realize that as a woman I ask more, need more, than as a child, and that while I love not only what you have been and are now, I want the what-you-are-to-be to tower as my idol? I think a woman's love cannot be complete without that — that outlook."

His face glowed a moment with a sort of spiritual light, as if he had soared at once to the heights of all she seemed to mean, but the illumination faded quickly, and there came again that other old, old thing, so instant and insistent with love at twenty-two and its object so near by.

"Nannie, I just love you. I care for nothing else. Can't you as a woman simply tell me as a man that you love me and will marry me, and take all the rest on trust? I don't like love on conditions. I don't give my love that way. Give me what my heart asks, and — and — Why, you ought to trust yourself for the other. Won't you, Nannie — won't you?"

The great question was stamped so strongly into his face that it seemed as if the deep lines graven by his eagerness might have hurt him,

had he been sane and sensitive then. She looked into the depths of all he seemed to feel, revelled there a moment at the strain so plain to her — so sweet to her as he suffered; waited till his lip lost its usual curve and his chin twitched. Then she lost herself in the great interest of the instant, and with her face fully turned to him, she began a series of little upward jerks of her head till the dimples in her chin and cheeks played directly at him, and his gaze could go downward past them to the tense curves of her pretty throat. He looked up at her eyes and saw a tear swim there, while her lips parted with an inspiration, as if the rich red smile ran on into her pulsing heart.

Then he leant forward, put the whip carefully in the socket, wrapped the lines round and round it very deliberately, and bent back again with something very, very purposeful in his pose.

“I say, Nannie: Your hair’s done up awfully nice, and that’s a mighty pretty hat you have on there. I’d hate to muss it all, you know, and I think you’d better take it off — the hat I mean — or else hold very still a minute —”

He lifted his left hand a trifle and she leant a little away from him in a very dignified way.

"You know we've always romped for them before this, but I thought maybe this time, Nannie —"

She looked him hard in the eyes a moment, half defiantly, but she met defiance and much more — the thing that had held the horses in. She hesitated an instant that her courage might rise again, then reached up with both hands behind her head, grasped the rubber string which was stretched beneath her hair, and let it snap noisily up against the rim of her hat. Shortly she put it back again beneath her net, let her hands fall into her lap in a tired pose, sighed and looked up at him mischievously, and said:

"I'd like a good fight with you, Bent, but" (she laughed blushing) "it's so much trouble to get the hat on good again. You — you — will — be — careful, won't you?"

And the lagging team started up at the sound of a little signal, which to them had always meant speed only, but to so many of us it has meant — destiny.

V

“A foregone Methodist conclusion.”

THIS scene had barely time to be enacted before the pair found themselves on the edge of the assemblage of wagons and horses hitched along the lanes, and among the usual groups of loungers which hang around such places on such occasions. Bent caught up his lines and whip again, and was soon awaiting his turn to drive up to the long platform and dismount, when he said:—

“I think I’ll just set you down here, Nannie, if you don’t care, and we’ll get in sooner.”

He alighted and put his broad palms under her elbows, and placed her gently on the ground as if she were a child. She was glad to be thus isolated from the great strange crowd, while he went off to tie the team somewhere. As he returned he could see her long before she saw him, and he noted with a thrill that her

face, sombre in apparent loneliness, brightened beautifully at his coming.

He offered her his arm, she took it and said:—

“I like your left arm too,” and then she blushed, and could have bitten her tongue off for her thoughtless speech—remembering her last experience with that arm. When Bent made matters worse by saying “Since when?” with a sort of chuckle, she snatched her hand away, and he tried, in a furtive playful dash, to catch it; but they straightened into proper dignity at the sight of the crowd inside the churchyard, which enclosure they were now entering. Despite all this they walked in proudly, keeping step together; and it did not take a very knowing one to see that they felt that they owned something in that region—a sort of instinctive right in earth and sky—and that now they were coming into their kingdom.

Of course, at that time, they were separated at the door; and Nannie’s rather suspicious nature was not quieted by the obsequiousness with which she was seated by a member, who knew so much of her and Bent’s associations. It was not presumption. It was politeness

only ; but there was in it also the diplomacy of the situation — a recognition of her condescension in coming and the faintest encouraging hint, of course, of a hope of something more — under the circumstances.

Nannie's own career in the past and the tenseness of her present wishes made her keenly appreciative of all this : it was what she had dreaded, since it was quite another thing to be its object than it was to be its instigator.

If she had come to worship, this thought alone might have spoilt her hour, but, as it was, she relapsed into pleasant memory of the ride, and roused herself only as something out of the usual order of her own service provoked her criticism.

For the first time Bent found his religious interest awakened, and he was caught in the whirl of enthusiasm and rhythmic groanings and amens. He had never heard this revivalist before. His methods were new. To-day he preached on the duty of gratitude to God for all His blessings — of a gratitude expressed as well as felt ; and he made a strong appeal to young manhood to place itself aright in the world, as it stepped out toward its destiny.

From the fulness of his recent assurance of Nannie's love and all the wealth of blessings which it seemed to bring, Bent's heart was open to any softening and ennobling influence, so that, when mourners were called for, he was early to rise and drop upon his knees at the altar.

Around him gathered the pillars and other props of the congregation, and some of the clinging vines besides; and they rejoiced in loud hortatory wails and gushes of exultant gratitude that the spirit was present in such power. Caught in this drift of enthusiasm, many others flocked in for "the prayer of the righteous which availeth much"; and the excitement ran high.

When all were exhorted to join, if they felt that their sins were forgiven and they were genuinely converted, Bent arose and gave the pastor his hand; and after a little whispered conversation, it was announced that Brother Thomas Benton Hickman came into the church by ratifying the consecrating vows of his parents and the baptism which he had received when an infant.

As the congregation finally broke, and Bent

turned away, he almost fell into the arms of his mother, who had been all aheap with hope. She burst forth with a sob that now she could die happy since she had seen the salvation of the Lord; for she too had long felt that something more was needed than his infant consecration. He had looked over Nannie's way several times, and had made many starts in that direction, but he could make no progress, on account of the many congratulations, benedictions, and long admonitions to a better life and to "keep his winders always open t'ward Jerusalem," with which he was besieged.

When he caught sight, now and then, of her face, there was a cool queer expression in it, which she was evidently doing her best to hide; and when he at last got to her and tried to say something, she did not sneer, but her lips would not close into the sweet pout even, which he had so often loved to provoke.

With the bustle of social chattings, serious and bantering, there was yet no chance for anything but the commonplaces of politeness between the two; but each felt the restraint and showed it. All through the dinner of good things, to which Bent had proudly, yet

embarrassingly, led her, as it was spread out by his mother's trembling hand and hallowed by her happy face, which beamed above it, the girl was silent; and she could only nibble at the food proffered. She would gladly have appeared easy if she could, but every move and glance of these people told her plainly what they were thinking, how some were rejoicing that she had not got Bent into her own church, and how others were counting surely upon her coming with him into theirs.

A neighboring brother of her faith — one of the "running water" type, who was married to a Methodist wife, had come that day to the prairie shrine, as the two "swapped meetin' days"; and he had been swept into the church by the wave of the spirit's power, which, he declared exultingly, he had never felt before. Nannie did not need therefore to overhear the undertone, "Oh, she'll come in all right, after she and Bent are—" to know what was being expected of *her*, and to feel that many eyes were set hopefully upon her — regarding her as an unregenerated target for the spirit's darts.

She had a stiff backbone denominationally, and it was stiffer now than ever; but to have

so many of her neighbors pitying her, hoping for her bettering, and regarding her tenderly as a foregone Methodist conclusion was too humiliating for endurance; and, in spite of effort, tears of chagrin came into her eyes.

"I know you're happy, honey"—one kind motherly soul had said, putting around her an arm which in childhood had oft been there before in maternal consolation, when the body and not the pride was smarting.

"It's uh great thing to bring back uh soul to grace. He'll make you uh better husband for this day. Ain't you glad you come?"

When Bent got back to her, after proffering food around, it was all she could do to keep herself from falling on his breast and crying right there in that big crowd; and some, who misinterpreted the motion of what fluttered as an impulse evidently in her face—thinking it a natural gratulation which should have prompted her—hummed here and there of her devotion. There were prim matrons there who would have condoned this breach of maidenly modesty, had she made it—"considerin'."

Knowing that her weakness was culminating, Nannie finally managed to say to Bent, "You

must take me home—I—am not well”: and really she looked it. She walked in silence with him toward the buggy. Some said, how touching her behavior was, and others thought it queer that a man just converted should leave the afternoon sermon; and there were those who quoted mumblingly something about, “I have married a wife, I pray thee have me excused.”

VI

“Beneath the paltry doctrine’s killing letter.”

THEY had scarcely got beyond the straggling groups of farmers lounging about their wagons while they fed their horses, when she burst into a great explosion of tears and sobs, holding her hidden face.

“Why, little girl,” he said tenderly. “Don’t cry! Are you so happy, Nannie? I ought not to have surprised you so, but I didn’t know it myself. The spirit—”

“Spirit, bosh!” she broke forth. “Don’t talk such nonsense to me, Bent Hickman,” looking at him defiantly. “I’ve had enough of that to-day. You brought me out here to humiliate me—and—and, if-fif-fif-fit does you any good to know it, you’ve suh-suc-ceeded b-b-beautif-ully!” and then came the breakdown again.

Poor Bent!

No true man enjoys the humiliation of a

woman, and especially the woman he adores. Bent was honest. He had acted purely upon impulse. He waited awhile and then leant tenderly toward her.

"Well, I did not mean to, I'm sure. I never thought of doing such a thing till — till —"

"Till you thought you had me safe," she retorted, her face up now, her eyes flashing through her tears.

The speech cut the boy — not that it was at all true, but that it might seem so to be, from her standpoint. He had never seen her countenance like that.

"No, I never thought of that, nor —"

"Nor of me either, I reckon," she said, inconsistently. "If you had —"

"Yes, I thought of you all the time, though not in that way — thought of you when, I'm ashamed to say, I ought to have been thinking of my sins — thought how I would now offer myself to you a changed man — a worthy partner of your own Christian life. I knew your strong denominational feelings, but believed that beneath all this, you would rejoice that I had turned away from sin, and had set my face in the same direction as your own."

She sat silent now—her sobs only soughing out in an occasional jerky way, betokening a coming calm.

“I recalled what you had said to me,” he continued, “‘loving all I was to be,’ and I resolved to begin there and then to make my future worthy of you.”

She was mollified a little, but her forebodings that all his steps would amount to naught without the essentials of her creed arose again. She was not so much interested in his life now, as in the conditions of his salvation—not realizing then that living meant all this.

“But—but how can you feel you’re saved, when you’ve not observed the commands—and not going to—not been really baptized?” she said.

The thing stung him a little.

“How can you feel that you’ve been saved when you’ve not felt the spirit’s call—and—and have not been wanting to?” he retorted. “It’s a sort of square-off, Nannie. I’d like to know that you’ve been regenerated, but—”

“And I’d like to know that your sins had been washed away!”

“Pshaw! Nannie, now you know just water and nothing else can’t save anybody—”

"Not just a few drops of it, of course, and that put on you when you're a baby —"

"Oh, water only types the spirit which really does the work, and it don't matter when you get it, or how much you get, so you get it as signifying this."

"Who ever saw the spirit now? The day of miracles is past. It acts only through the written word — What does Paul say?" she retorted.

"I don't care what he says! You don't see the spirit — you feel it. I know I've felt it and —"

"Stuff! Hunh!"

"Nannie, don't you believe I'm saved — that if I was to die —?"

"No, not till you go down into the water and come up out of the water as Jesus did. How can you be resurrected till you're buried with Christ in baptism?"

"Why — that's — that's a mere figure. It says in a verse below that we're 'crucified with him,' and at Colossians, two, eleven — Why, you're buried with Him in baptism of course, because you're baptized into His death. That's what it says."

But she came back at him with the stock phrases, and so they wrangled on through the old stiff dogmas of their creeds—their loves chilling as they drove. The man's mood was not defiant or combative, as was the girl's, but it was in no sense yielding, and, at times, it was sharply defensive, for he felt that he should not be so fiercely assailed; and her contempt tried him sorely.

At last their love lay low beneath the paltry doctrine's killing letter, and their unhappy hearts were hardened into a sullen silence. He was looking forward at his team, lifting his lines occasionally and flipping his whip here and there, to square the doubletree across the tongue. He did not like one-sided things, himself. What trifling affairs the mind may stoop to mechanically, when the heart only is running the soul!

But the softening of the young man's life was genuine. There could be no doubt about the sincerity of his conversion, or his tender interest in the girl. After a long silence he said, with choking throat, that he hoped the spirit *would* call her some time yet into the light where her baptism could also come, but which alone would never lift her — no matter how per-

formed. She did not move. Perhaps after all she felt at least the sincerity of his interest; but when, to illustrate, he made the mistake of citing the example of the "running water" brother, who had joined that day, her cup was brimmed. She turned a flashing face to him, and stamped her foot and bade him never speak to her again on such a subject. In an instant she was back in her old mood of the morning.

The man seemed to think for some time in a sort of dazed way as though he were stunned by a blow. Away down in the deep woods, where the trees swayed into each other and moaned at every breeze, some one of them rubbed against the other in that most lonesome of woodland sounds, and he seemed to come to himself again — awaking at the same point mentally at which he was when the blow fell.

"I need not ever, Nannie. I'm no missionary, as I said this morning. I feel that *your* face is set right, and the grace of God will save you; but if you were a heathen, Nannie, — not only an infidel or a sinner — I should love you yet. Or if you had joined a church which I did not like, I'd still love you. You don't seem to love me much just now, Nannie."

And he paused, in the great hunger of his heart, that the savor of something of the morning's bliss might float forth.

"We've had a peculiar day, Nannie—God knows, a very different one, in some respects, from what I hoped. Yet I would not take it back for worlds. I can see your home, Nannie. I'm not going in, to give you more of my poor company to-day. I've worried you enough. But can't you say something to a fellow, that might cheer and help him a little, when he's trying to do right?"

He waited a moment and slowed his team down as it began to climb the road, fiercely set with points of flint-rocks and winding up the Flint Creek hill here and there for easy grade, as though these prairie paths, running side by side so lazily and long, felt tired themselves even, at encountering anything to climb.

"You *do* love me yet, don't you, Nannie?"

She was looking down at the crossbar against which she had braced a foot.

"If I *am* a Methodist?" he added.

She tapped the bar with her toe and took her under lip within her teeth.

"Nannie!"

The tires crunched the finer stones and gravel on the hilltop. He reached for his whip, which was in its socket, and, as he tightened his lines a little, the team began to trot. After some minutes he said :—

“Nannie, *I can see your stiles.*”

She turned a half-scared face to him, at the peculiar something in his voice, and before she could help it she looked her wonder at what it meant. There was an expression in his face she had never seen before.

He slowed his team again, and relaxed his lines. She looked away.

“I’ve not a word of apology for what I’ve done to-day, because I know my heart. There has not been one disloyal thought to you, or one deed that was intended to hurt your feelings. I *am* sorry that they are hurt—just *sorry*—that’s all. Don’t misunderstand me, Nannie. Religion’s something that hasn’t stuck very deep into me before this. I’m not liable to get more than I can carry anywhere; and I’m apt to carry more of the kind I like and have been used to—than—than—the kind I—than some other kinds. But I’m not so awfully taken with my denomination that I

couldn't love *you* while you stayed in yours, as I've been saying; but if you think you're going to persuade me that I'm not saved, till I go under the water, you're mistaken, that's all. I believe that through *all* these years when, as a girl, you *did* love me, Nannie, that God was drawing me to him by your sweet face and tender ways — and — and — to-day when you — you — kissed me, as a woman, and my promised wife, and said what you did, I was as much saved as I'll ever be, water or no water — joining or no joining — because *then* I resolved to be a better man — — and — and *I'm going to be*. I'm not going to let your fifteen years of love fail you, Nannie. . . . It — it — shall not return to you — even if you wanted it to — 'void of good works.' ”

He climbed out, opened the gate, and got in again.

The girl sat there unmoved. She would have given a hand if she could cry to him. What was it that had hardened her in her mood?

“You've not only been the voice in the wilderness to me, Nannie, but the voice in the highway too, calling me on; and I felt to-day that I was catching up a little — had got in sight at least; but if you can't — can't, s — suh — ay — that

you love — me, Nannie, and that you will try to lead me farther on —”

(There was the scrape of the wheel upon the steel fender on the buggy-box, as the team turned that her side might come up to the stiles.) “If you can’t keep step with me, Nannie —” (He reached an arm behind her to unhinge the jointed strut which held the top up. She shied forward a little. He bent the one on his side, and the top fell back.) “—in a path which runs by your own —going your way —” (The buggy stopped at the stiles. She rose—refused to wait till he alighted—refused to take his proffered hand, but stepped out—her face away.) “why then —” (He waited an instant for her to turn, and then he swung the raised top back to its place erect,) “I’ll have to go alone, I reckon. Good-by!”

And at the same sweet sound which had merged their hearts that morning, the team sped away — and parted them.

VII

"You can't *drive* him with a sledgehammer, but you can *lead* him with a cobweb."

THE girl stood for a moment before she stepped down, and then she turned and gasped as she tried to cry after him; but she could only watch the buggy-top bobbing away in short jerks as if it were giggling at her discomfiture, and note the horses tossing their heads as if they were glad to be free of their burden. Since the road ran away askew, she could not see the occupant, but the taut lines stretching back into the seat and quivering in short vibrations showed how strong and determined were the hands which held their hither ends.

She turned toward the house, and realized in the closed shutters, in the very pose of the old dog upon the step, and the tread of the poultry, that no one was at home; for after church her people had gone to dinner with some neighbor.

She knew now what this meant to her: at home alone the rest of the long afternoon—with nothing but her sorrow. She rushed forward and shook the door, which she *knew* was fast, but there was a little relief in shaking; and then she ran around to the rear porch where the key was often hid in a favorite cranny. But it was not there.

She might have gone around front again, and sat upon one of the benches under the trees, till the folks came, but she did not want the passers-by to know that she had been dumped and left. It was all so dreadfully real now, that she felt that any one who saw her would know about it.

Never since she could remember had she felt what it was to be without this boy's love—never had there been any such vacancy in her life as this—never had he turned from her.

She dropped limply upon the back steps, and burst out crying—the solitude allowing her to sob long and loud and even to wail. At this the poultry came around, put first one eye, then the other, and alternate ears, upon the situation; but since it meant no food for them, they could not make it out. When she became silent, the

turkey gobbler strutted with a defiant boom, and the rooster became so suspicious of the solemn figure that he said, "Take care there, now, take care," as though she were a menace in their midst.

She remembered that sometimes her mother forgot about the key, till she had gone out to the stiles, and then she put it under a certain plank near the gate. The girl stole around the house almost half bent to find it. It was there, and she unlocked the front door, rushed up to her room, and proceeded to have another seizure of suffering. She delighted in her sorrow. "What a fool — what a fool I have made of myself," she said over and over again, sobbing a sort of enjoyment out of the situation.

At last she heard the wagon jolt up to the stiles and stop, and her mother's anxious exclamation that the front door should be open. A moment later there was her heavy but hurried step upon the stair. Nannie rose, and began anew her grief — telling, in tears, all the day's doings and then the final scene.

"Lord, honey, is that all? I feared you was sick. It's nuthin', father," she called out through the raised sash. "Nannie jest beat us

home a little, that's all," and then, turning to her daughter again, she said, "Of course you done wrong. I don't blame Bent a bit. You'll have to apologize to him—if you care for him, and I guess by the look of them eyes that yer do."

"But what 'd he want to go and make a Methodist of himself right in my face for? I —"

"Oh, they all catch it that uh way. I was uh Methodist myself onct, yuh know, 'fore I saw thuh light. I got it that way. But that don't ermount to nothin'. You wait. Wa'n't yo' paw a hide-bound Calvinistic, callin'-an'-election-sure Presbyterian, for a while after I married him? You know he's got uh lots grit about him too, but—well, you've hearn him talk about obejunce?"

"But, mother, Mr. Timmons joined them to-day—went with his wife. It goes that way sometimes, and it may —"

"Well, it comes our way a heap of'ner," said the mother consolingly, uttering a statement very undeniable at that time in that region.

"Come now, brighten up. Why, there's your brother Dick coming!"

Dick had gone to town to practise law, and was in a certain sense successful. By virtue of his high calling, he was rapidly becoming the oracle of the family. His father feared that he was loosening his moorings a little, but his mother's pride in him was so great that she would have granted a dragged anchor, provided his drifting were toward success.

"Now don't tease Nannie, Dick, she's been over to the Methodis' meeting and's tired and not feelin' well. She went out with Bent."

"All right, mother."

At supper Nannie was a little late, but went around the table and kissed her brother and took her seat opposite. He chatted in a gossipy way, raising many laughs from his parents, but only the sickliest smile from his sister. Presently this impressed him.

"Why, Sis," he said, "your eyes are red. Understand you went out to-day to the Methodist meeting. Say they are having big times out there. Softening that way a little, eh? Well, I tell you, I've got some mighty good friends in town among 'em, and—"

He looked up and saw a tear steal down her cheek.

"Why, look here, Nannie, what's Bent Hickman been saying to you that—? Why, I'd—" and he pushed his chair back menacingly from the table.

Her lip lifted in a little sneer.

"It's nothing you could do anything about. Bent Hickman could shake you till you were frayed out on the edges, big as you feel yourself. The girl that rides with him don't need any defender."

Richard saw that he had made a wrong tack. He turned to his mother inquiringly.

"Oh, Bent jest j'ined the Methodist to-day, and Sis thought— Sis she thought—"

"Mother!" exclaimed the girl.

"Well, then," said the oracle, "what have you been saying to Bent Hickman?"

She did not deign to answer him, but she caught the kindly, interested eye of her father, with a questioning look in it, and she broke out:—

"I—I—didn't say anything. I wouldn't speak to him when he left—boo-hooh-uh!"

"Now, Richard, stop," said the mother.

"Why, I haven't said anything to hurt, but I'd like to add this, Nannie: I know Bent Hick-

man, and if you knew as much about the temptations that beset him or any other boy as I do, —knew the tendencies of his business, —you'd rejoice that he had joined any church. Oh, he's not bad, —morally bad, —Bent isn't, but just roughening a little. He's a darned sight better than I am —excuse me, mother —in many ways. What I mean is, none of us are too good to join any people with their faces set Godward. He isn't any saint, but he's got a lot of stuff in him to make one out of if you work it right, and no mere *denominationalism* can spoil it. But let me tell you, little sister, *you* can spoil it —if you —don't be careful. He's a fellow that can't be driven with a sledge-hammer, but if you know how to pull properly, and don't pull against his convictions of right, you can *lead* him with a cobweb."

"But I — I — don't want to be a Methodist — I —"

"Well, you need not be, and he needn't belong to your church either, unless he wants to. Lord! Methodists are not poison! The two old people who raised this mother of ours were of that faith — a faith that was piling heaven up with saints before —"

“Now, Richard, hush!”

“Well, it’s so, mother. I know you and your church have a mission, but you’ve not got all the religion in the world coralled — nor has any other denomination. Tell you what, I’ve got a little Methodist girl in town —”

“So that’s it, is it?” sniffed the mother.

“Yes, *ma’am*! and if her heart is not in the right place, it’s because it’s not in my possession in fee simple, that’s all. She can get a mortgage or deed of trust on everything I’ve got, prejudice and all; and the day she closes out, I’ll be shouting — darned if I —”

“Why, Richard!”

“Beg pardon, mother; I get rather reckless on the subject. Why, when you get desperate as I am about an angel here already, your speech gets a little loose, and — and — your denominational ideas also. If Sis there were having the hard time to win Bent’s love that I am in winning this seraph’s, she’d have less room for all this stuff now. Why, girl, that boy has laid his love at your feet all your life, and you’ve never lost a moment’s rest about it. What you need is to have four or five other girls trying to win him — and almost succeed-

ing. Lord! how little these church affairs would seem then! You need to get hungry for love once, my girl—starved gaunt and lean, like your brother. Don't I look pale and interesting?"

They all smiled at his light spirit, and especially this last query, in view of his rotund body and ruddy face; and the conversation drifted in other channels till Nannie's eyes dried and her face paled.

But her night was a tossing, sleepless one. She had not treated Bent right; and what if it were as her brother had said, that he had other girls after him? This thought had scarcely ever come to her, so perfect had been his devotion—but now it was a possibility. How many cases had she known where boys had gone off and offered themselves to other girls (and been accepted), because they had been rebuffed by a former love; and how many times had the old sweetheart sorrowed all her life for the opportunity thus thrown away! Why, her mother had often told her of many such. Out there upon the prairie, she could think of several rosy-cheeked lasses of his own creed who, she knew, would be glad to get Bent Hickman; and

she heightened her woe by imagining herself left, and another spinning by his side along the prairie roads.

The week wore away in the simple duties of her home, brightened a little by the hope that Saturday night might bring him, but it did not; and she went again to her room with a heavy heart. The Methodist meeting had not closed yet. She could not hope to meet him on the morrow at her own church, therefore.

So next morning she did not go to meeting; and her mother, divining her distress, did not urge her, but even offered to stay at home with her. No, the daughter said, she would stay alone—voluntary solitude being a very different thing from that which is thrust upon one—besides, she had the preparation of dinner to engross her.

For this meal to-day two or three wagon-loads of her neighbors came home with her parents unannounced, as the custom was, paying back visits similar in kind and quantity; therefore, Nannie's Sunday afternoon was a busy one.

VIII

“The picture fixed . . . artistically perfect in her mind—and heart.”

ONE day, when Nannie was a child, awakening a little to things about her, she chanced to glance into an old burning-glass with which her father lit his pipe on sunny days, and lo! a little picture of all the landscape that lay behind her was reflected, with so much shown in a look, and so much only hinted in a projecting limb or leaning fence-stake, and the whole scene so condensed that she could take it in. She gasped at the sensation. It was new and enthralling to her.

Inasmuch as she found her father with this glass on sunny days only, these pictures became mingled in her mind with bright scenes, so that none but hopeful associations were inspired by them. Even on her blue days, if she could peep into the lens as she faced it toward a window, the outlook seemed robbed

somewhat of its dreariness, no matter what the light was, and her heart was lifted from its depression by her little art.

The many occupations of the early week, usual in any rural home, engrossed her for a few days, but when she had ironed the pretty trifles, with which she was accustomed to deck herself for somebody's coming, their suggestiveness made her sad; and she had little else now to divert her mind.

Early one afternoon her father came in, tired from cutting corn; and, filling his pipe, he stepped to the western window to light it by the sunbeams there. When he was done with it his daughter held her hand out, and he smiled and dropped the old glass into her palm, as he had often done when she was a child. Then she went out for a walk.

As she looked at this little scene and that, she thought of the beauty of the baptismal bend in the creek, with the road crossing it in a flat curve on one side and climbing in a serpentine stretch the bank and higher hill on the other. She thought also of the play of the ripples on the glass of the deep pool, and that the light now was just right to brighten the long vista

under the birches. Yes, she would go on to that! At last she reached the place, and upon the oozy sand under some overhanging alders, she turned her back to the scene, and, for the best effect, thrust her lens into the depths of her sunbonnet, which she had taken from her head.

To her soul, so full of potential art, the beauty was entrancing. The ripples danced and sparkled, the steep bank rose beyond, rock-studded and flower-gilded with an autumn gold; the flags swept and swayed on the frayed edges of the shallows, while over the deep cool sweep below, the light crept in under the fringes of willows, and played in dappling spots upon the surface, as the current or the zephyr moved the sprays. Farther down, a birch, partially undermined, had bent out across the pool in a long arch of curly, papery bark, and had touched the other bank with its tip. From its gray trunk, yet alive, sprang limbs which grew erect and straight as saplings, and they drove their drab stems into the dome of green above. Overhead the maples and the lindens leaned out from either bank and lapped into each other a solid tangle of tops and twigs, while, above this still,

the white, gaunt skeleton of a sycamore stood as a giant sentinel, sending back the slanting sunbeams with defiance.

As the girl gazed and drank in the scene, the large leaves of the spreading sycamore fell whirling into the upper ripples, and rode the little billows as petty ships—then launched themselves out on the deeper, calmer water with graceful swanlike swayings, this way or that, as breeze or billow caught them.

Enthralled as she was, she felt the lack of a figure or moving thing, and she wished that a fawn, or calf, might come to drink in the old conventional way ; or that anything picturesque might move into the scene.

Just then she thought she heard the step of a shod hoof, somewhere upon the gravel, and she turned her head to listen ; but her constrained pose would not allow her to see behind her. She looked quickly into her lens again, and—a horseman had ridden into the current, and was leaning forward to slack his reins, as his steed stretched its neck to drink.

There was only one figure in all the region like that. The drab broad-brimmed hat of wool was set slightly back from the forehead,

the loose gray coat swung short above the stout, strong lower limbs, which gripped the leather skeleton of a Western or Spanish saddle. Below, the trousers ran on in rude folds and ripples into boot-tops which wrinkled onward still to the star of steel which projected from the heel. Beyond this, the well-sized foot was lost in the depths of a wide wooden stirrup, capped in front by a broad cowhide fender. Behind, upon the horse's flank, in coil upon coil, hung a drover's whip.

The tired beast drank long and much, and the man, weary of his ride and the forward strain, letting loose the bridle, bent back and stretched himself, baring the brawn of his broad neck and the curve of his strong jaw to the slanting light. He brought down the right arm beside the body, as if, while the taut tendons quivered and the fist clenched, it were posing for a blow; and the left was stretched out, with a grasp half closed and reaching, toward the stripe of sky which ran beneath the treetops and above the rim of the hill.

The lens dropped from her fingers upon the sand, which soiled its surface; and when she had regained it, she turned about. The picturesque

effect was gone, or had merged into the wide woodland landscape. Upon the flinty hill beyond, she heard the stroke of the horse's shoes, and anon there came in view, through the foliage rifts, glimpses of a rider and his steed climbing the tortuous steep. She washed the lens, polishing it clear upon her apron, and crept again to the old position for another view, but she hesitated a little — let her arm fall — arose and went away, leaving the picture fixed as she had last seen it, artistically perfect, in her mind — and heart.

As she went home, she stopped to view again a little scene by the way whose outlines were very clear; and she thought that some day she might try to sketch it, since the other had been so inspiring. Later she began copying, and was surprised at her success. One afternoon she stole out and sketched the little easy scene, and was encouraged. Then she began to wonder if she could ever do that other one, and put into it all it had been to her.

IX

"Heered the news, I reckon? We're goin' ter have uh debate!"

BENT had no one at home to whom, under the circumstances, he could go for consolation. He was an only child, and had always given his mother his confidence about himself and Nannie; but now it was impossible to tell her of this last episode, because he knew she would recognize the injustice of it, and think less of the girl for it. He could not tolerate the idea of that. No one should condemn her but himself.

Lately Nannie, conscious of coming things, had been shy of Mrs. Hickman, and the mother often wondered what the boy's sweetheart was like now, since she knew so well that the little girl is not always mother to the woman if the "boy is father to the man."

This mother and son had always lived very close to each other. The father had fallen in Price's army in the early part of the war, leaving a debt upon the farm, and all the responsibilities

of a man upon the shoulders of a boy. But the lad had stood up under it in times that tried the stuff a soul was made of; and now by his industry the old place was about clear of its encumbrances, and was fairly well stocked, while there was a little trading bank account ahead, along with excellent credit.

With it all, during the winters, the boy had got some education in books, and at other times much education in the world. His mother's information was far beyond that of her average neighbors, and she helped him — often at night when she should have slept; and he had inherited her mental grasp, and had absorbed much of her culture.

But the world had been his teacher, and he knew the little realm in which he moved — and he moved in it with what he thought was the consciousness of knowing himself as well.

However, as he drove home after leaving Nannie he was not so sure of things, and was much cut up indeed. He had seen her in the "pouts" before, but he had always been able to joke her out of them, or else they were so trifling in their demands that he could yield. But this was a different matter. His suffer-

ings were not so keen as hers, since he had a good conscience about his step; and his righteous indignation therefore tarried a while with him.

He felt sure, from his past experience, that he could renew his mere acquaintance with Nannie—at any chance moment, at least; and that out of this some sort of reconciliation might follow. But the far prospect was not pleasing. Why should this not come up again and again between them, and forever come?

As the days wore on, and he rode here and there at his work, this worried him. His love never wavered, it shrank from being wounded only, while his pride held its head a little high. He widened his trading circle—going over the border of the county, hallooing at the quaint homes where hogs were seen, or pulling down bars and “gaps” in the worm fences till he found the farmer in the field. Here they bantered at prices—not heeding the scriptural injunction of avoiding many words in buying and selling; and bids and offers, which were far apart at first, approached each other in fractions of eighths and fourths till they stood defiant with only a trifle—and a pride of judgment—between them.

Sometimes one broke his moorings, sometimes the other, and there and then the sale was made; or, as the trader rode away, the farmer cried after him far over the field, or ran cross lots and intercepted him at a bend of the road, or came on to a neighbor's where he knew that Bent was going to tarry. Perhaps the trader, after dragging gates and pulling bars in tedious iteration, would pass the hog lot again, and view the stock a second time, and then ride back through all and offer an eighth more per pound, or give the farmer his price. If it were not an important deal, he "helloed" to the wife again, and told her to tell her husband that he would take the hogs at the farmer's price, if they were driven over to Mr. Blank's on a certain day, where he had already purchased others.

Thus went the pretty season,—so full of things immediate that his mind had little time to heed the soreness of his heart. But when, some days after, he drifted home again, feeling well about his successful buying, he was sure that he would go over that night and "see the folks at Ditmer's."

But he found some company at home which he could not leave, and the next day and night

it rained. He did not just like to let her feel that he was so badly off as to come through the storm to her. Then news came from "the market": it was up and climbing. He rushed out to ask the delivery of his purchases, and to get them to the near shipping stations—points very few and far between in those days in his region. Finally he boarded the train with them, destined for the metropolis.

He was gone for some time, selling here and there as best he could. Then he started home with a snug profit in his pocket—a thing which did not always happen; but it was happening often enough now for him to think of the future much—and of many things which the future hints to the young.

As, in the easy swinging gait of his trading pony, he rode out from town, he dreamed the dreams of youth and success combined. Again he thought of the Ditmers, and, of course, thought more firmly that he would go over right away and see if Nan was mad yet.

Just then he looked up, and there was before him a Presbyterian neighbor—a rattling, good-hearted, gossiping fellow, living in the zeal of his own narrations purely.

"Hello, Bent, jist uh gittin' home?"

"Yes. How's all?"

"Oh, all's well. Heerd the news in town, I reckon?"

"No! Didn't stop long. What is it?"

"Goin' tuh have uh debate."

"At what schoolhouse?"

"Schoolhouse — nuthin'! In our church. Biggest thing you ever heerd of. Campbellites and Methodists goin' to fight it out."

"Hunh!"

"Yes, Campbellites took up their meetin' jist after you-all's stopped, as the' alluz do, and their preacher bore ser hard on the mourner's bench and infant baptism, and made ser much of immersion and ther spehret only in ther written word, that ther Methodists couldn't stand it."

"Unh hunh!" said Bent.

"Yes, they've sent off fer a big gun they alluz keeps loaded and ther Campbellites's 'fraid their Mr. Norton can't handle him; so they's sent fer a noted fighter o' theer'n, and ther fur's goin' ter fly, I speck!"

Bent was not so responsive as the neighbor hoped to find him — but the latter continued: —

"Two weeks fightin', they say — uh hour

fer each mornin' and evenin' every day, and preachin' at nights and Sundays. People's comin' f'um town, they say, and everywhere — preachers and elders — writin' fer boord ahead in the neighborhood. Neighbors awfully stirred up about it."

Bent rode on with a heavy heart. It would not do to go over to the Ditmers' now. This was no time for a reconciliation.

As stated by the gossip, the discussion was to take place at the Presbyterian church, as a sort of neutral ground. This was chosen also because each disputing denomination needed its own building in which to hold recruiting services at night.

At last the time came, and daily the crowd packed the pews, stood in the aisles, sat in the windows, and surged around the building. Some bunched themselves into wrangling knots, more eager to exploit their own polemics than to listen to that of others. From the crowded depths, now and then, a courier came, announcing victory according to his views, and firing further the zeal of these external skirmishers. Business of every kind, except the most urgent, was suspended; everybody had company; and neigh-

bors who once warmly shouted mutual greetings as they passed, jolted by each other in crowded farm-wagons with cool nods only now. Even ties of consanguinity sometimes failed to hold, and the sanctity of home was disturbed by the unholy wrangling.

X

“Jesus Christ, this side of you a little is good enough for me.”

It was a queer assemblage with queer motives and impulses which surged from day to day around the chosen building. Perhaps in all the propositions discussed, the Presbyterian stood — or sat, rather — shoulder to shoulder with his Methodist brother. Both disputants were Arminian, and hence no discussion arose on Calvinism. But the Baptist brother was a factor not to be counted on through thick and thin, by either party. When the Methodist orator rose up and “rawhided” the Campbellite brother for ignoring the immediate action of the spirit, and knowing nothing of experimental religion, the Baptist grinned broadly, inasmuch as he had always claimed that the newer denomination had seceded from his own, and had failed to take with it these important doctrines. But when the other disputant came

back with burning ridicule of sprinkling, in spite of the literal meaning of the Greek *bapto*, and sneered at infant baptism, defying the pedobaptist to find a single record of it in the Bible, the Baptist leaned the other way and took his seat upon the deep-water side of the congregation.

Bent was present in much of this, keenly alive to it all, and pained by it. To no one did this fray mean more than to himself — no one was losing so much — or so likely to lose. To him, suffering, and feeling sorely at times the humiliation of his position in the ridicule of the trenchant disputant of the other people, these Baptist folk seemed to have a restful place which he felt that he would like to occupy.

To Nannie it had again a deadening effect on her love — her wild enthusiasm shutting out all other feeling. So worked up did she get that she caught anew the sullen spirit of the prairie drive and her firm step upon the stile. Her lover was not her enemy, but he was in the ranks of the enemy — the enemy to the hosts of Christ — in the battle of the Lord against the mighty. But there were times when she sighed for a comfort, which this thought did

not give her; and the hunger of her heart was not satisfied with the mere sop which her prejudices threw to it.

Night after night, groups of from three to eight joined either church, and there were sprinklings or "affusions" on the prairie, and the pool in the bend of Flint Creek was frequently murky from a series of immersions. At both churches the world recognized the new members as joining just as they would enlist in any other cause or drop into any procession running in the line of party prejudices or zeal. And the world, wise in its own conceit, and doubly wise now from its saner standpoint, smiled at the ridiculous features, and had much cause for smiling.

One awkward brother had strangled badly at his immersion; and a simple sister, in the shock of the deep, cool water of the autumn, had grabbed the plunging pastor around the neck, and held on grimly in spite of all his efforts. He succeeded in the rite, by dipping himself with her; but there were those who averred that her toes never did go under; and it was a debatable question whether she had been baptized or not. "Mandy can always dance,"

some said. "She didn't get her toes into the church."

The next day after this event, the Methodist brother hinted at the catastrophe with some suggestion of deeper water and "end on" plunges. Perhaps a spring-board or a pair of hand-cuffs—or leaden toe-plates, for instance, might expedite matters, he said. Why not try it again, since the literal meaning of the word "baptizo" was to "dip repeatedly." Maybe after all these deep-water folks would learn by practice the frequentative meaning of the Greek.

In opposition to these immersions the Methodists felt that they must make a demonstration in the line of infant baptism; but they were in a dilemma, because nearly all the children of the communion had been so baptized already. But among the recent joiners they found a family just moved in—stranded on the way from Kansas—who had a half-dozen tow-headed youngsters, at least four of which were young enough to come under the ecclesiastical definition of an infant.

On a certain night these were "corralled," as the deep-water disputant subsequently ex-

pressed it. There was a fitness in the word and they really seemed as if they should be in the other ranks, where a fuller bath was possible. At the close of the meeting, they stood in a row, and, wild-eyed, they watched the pastor, as he approached with the pitcher in hand. At the last moment the eldest broke for freedom, and, despite a few hands held out in the aisle, he and the two next older brothers escaped into the night. But the baby girl was held and, in her screams and struggles, was baptized — consecrated.

The scene was dispiriting to Benton. It not only impressed him as a failure, but the part performed as a farce; and he began to wonder if his own baptism had not been something like this?

Next day the immersionist orator had his inning. He suggested to the Methodist brother that, since the breezes were rather constant upon the prairie, a nice addition to his church would be a bored well, a pump, a windmill, a tank elevated for pressure, and a hose attached, so that he might catch the passing infant on the fly — a feat doubtless easily performed, he added, since he had heard that there were many fine wing-shots in the region.

And again the world smiled — out loud.

To Bent, in his dilemma, all this was disgusting. There must be something wrong somewhere, if a church was always fighting about its creed, or was in a constant state of explanation and apology about what it believed. It was enough to fight bad impulses, let alone a lot of pet dogmas that always needed doctoring. He reckoned that was why they called them doctrines. He knew little about Baptist beliefs. They seemed easy and comfortable at this time surely, and they had an all-round sort of fitness in this fight.

Therefore, a few Sundays after the debate was over, but while the war was still raging in the lanes and other meeting-places, Bent went over to confer with some of the Baptist members about joining them; and they appointed an influential brother to confer with him at some hour before the night meeting.

"We believe in immersion," said the instructor.

"Oh, yes — of course," said Bent. "No trouble about that!"

"And you have to have experience —"

"Yes, I've had scads of that too," said the boy.

"Experience in *grace*," said the brother.

"Unh!" said Bent.

"We believe our church has come right down in a straight line from John the Baptist, and—"

"I'm far enough back for you. Some of us go back to Adam. A few stop at Abraham, but most of us hang up at John Wesley. I'm not particular. Jesus Christ—this side of you a little—is good enough for me."

"And we take a vote about your bein' baptized and bein' admitted into the church, you know."

"You do?"

"Yes, majority rules."

"Hunh! That's funny."

"What's funny? about the majority?"

"No, about the baptizing. Who's it being done for, you, me, or Christ?"

"Why—well—er—" said the brother.

"Christ says to every one, 'Believe and be baptized,' don't he?"

"Yes, yes."

"Say anything about believing and being voted on anywhere?"

"Nuh—no."

"After I'm baptized, am I a Christian?"

"Yes."

"Voting or no voting?"

"Yes, but you ain't a — a —"

"Baptist?"

"Yes, yes; that's it."

"All right," said Bent.

"And we believe in close —"

"Oh, I know," said the boy; "all of us believe in something which the Bible says nothing about."

That night he was voted in as a *candidate for baptism*, and the next Sunday afternoon was set for his immersion.

XI

"Well, girls are funny things — when they get big!" he said.

Now, as the excitement died away, Bent found something of his zeal in this new direction subsiding. The chill autumn rains were coming on, and all the outlook seemed gloomy and depressing.

He was aware that he was getting very little nearer to Nannie in this step than he was before, and he was sure that he was not making it to propitiate her.

In rural regions a baptizing always attracts a crowd, and on this occasion some were upon one side of the creek and some upon the other, edging up to the very brink for a better view. It was the old pool at Flint Hill ford, so sacred in association.

Bent knew it well, and thought, as he waded in from the shallow edge, that over next the high bank there, whence he had often dropped a line for "new lights" or "crappies," it was

“over a fellow’s head.” On the little bluff above this he saw Nannie, with awed mien and a very pale face indeed. He shook his head to clear it of any thoughts of her, if possible, but he could not help realizing how he loved the sweet solemnity of her face, and he wondered — if — if —

“Benton, I baptize thee, in the name of — ”

But before the sentence, or the act implied, was complete, there was a little hustle on the bank above, the sprinkle of a few pebbles into the water, a volley of screams, and the splash of a skirt-clad figure head-on into the pool.

With a bound, the candidate was away and under the water also, leaving a swirling eddy in the place where he had plunged. It was a solemn picture — that awed crowd standing breathless and gazing silently for seconds, which seemed minutes, into the water, as only ripples and such very suggestive bubbles broke from its surface.

Presently the boy’s head arose and shook itself, and, as the wind whistled into his nostrils, he sank again. Then there was a heaving billow washing toward the shallows — a bit of floating garment — the swell of a

limp form — a sturdy head beside it — a burden slid gently from the shoulder to the tender grasp of arms in front — a stride into outstretched hands from the lesser depths, and the anxious throng upon the bank.

In a few gasps she “came to,” because in her faint, perhaps, she had not breathed while under water.

When things were a little quieter, the minister expected to renew his efforts at immersion in proper form, but Bent would have none of it. He said he had gone under the water after the “saying was said” — and that was enough. He didn’t believe in *too many* rebaptisms, he muttered. But in his heart of hearts he held this immersion as doubly sacred, just as it was: he would not have touched it for worlds, nor would he have substituted any other for it — because — because — it was now of his own will — no voting on it — and — and he — thought with tears — it was to save the life — as Christ was baptized to save life — the life of another — and — and the life of *such another*.

There were gossiping times for a while in that region. Many doubted the validity of the baptism. Some called it self-baptism and of no

account ; said the verb was in the passive voice — “*be* baptized.” But if it was, one thing was certain, the candidate was *not*. He grew aggressive when spoken to about it, fought back in words — hurling his old Methodist contempt for modes, in well-worn phrase, but with forcible expression. Not only had he found no rest, but he himself had become a bone of contention ; and, although it was intimated to him finally that the Baptists would receive him, he was so embittered that he almost scorned the proffer. To the Methodists he felt that he had been disloyal, and his pride kept him from aggressive work in that field, though his membership still held there. So he roved the region in search of stock, a sort of denominational outlaw — except that his hand was against nobody.

He often wondered how Nannie was taking all this — or if it interested her at all. He was, in his loneliness, thirsty to see her. Oh, if they could only meet upon the old ground — before the denominational war began ! Since he had saved her, he had too great an advantage of her, he felt, to go over for a reconciliation — he was too much of a man for that, he thought. It was enough to faint and be ducked before a

crowd, let alone to have *him* coming over and reminding her of it. Besides, she might blame him for it all. He wondered why she fainted, however, and —

“Well, girls are funny things — when they get big!” was about all he got out of the situation.

He had gone over one day to buy the fall calves which her father had, and he had heard the “woo-oo-oo” of a spinning-wheel, and had seen a figure, which he thought too lithe and brisk for Mrs. Ditmer’s, swing back and forth in the passage or wide hall.

He thought he heard a song which seemed light-hearted, and he wondered if it were meant for him — to tell him that she was not pining her life away. He would miss the pretty mittens plushed with many colored yarns which had been knit for him every winter now for years — miss them as he rode about trading, and — he would miss the inspiration of the trade.

XII

"And the bird which she thought was dead . . . whirred away across the fields."

"WELL," said the oracle, who had been out of the county, settling up an estate, and had rushed home to see his folks as soon as he returned, "this is darned nice work, Nannie—this drawing. You've all been having a high old time since I left, I hear. Regular cheek-by-jowl religious battles. Funny spurt Bent took, wasn't it? Sorry he didn't come further your way, however. By the by, I just heard about you at Bent's baptizing. What was the matter with you? You and he have made up, I reckon, — especially after that?"

There was a sustained silence in which Dick looked from mother to sister.

"Bent hasn't been over, 'cept to buy the calves," said the mother.

"Hasn't been over!" almost screamed the

oracle. "Why, don't he know how to accept hospitality and — and — gratitude when it's offered him? Why —"

"Now do be calm, Richard! I wanted to invite him, but Sis she thought —"

"*Didn't* you write him, or send him a message after he —?"

"Nuh — no," said Nannie; "I couldn't."

"What! Couldn't thank a man, a lifelong friend, for dragging you, dripping wet, out of the deepest hole in the county, and he a —? Why, such silence is an insult, — and that to my old boyhood friend. Why, what the devil —?"

"Now, Richard!"

"Why, I am going right out there. Say, Uncle George" (stepping to the door and yelling), "don't put that colt up; I want him. If none of the rest of this house hasn't sense enough, *I'm* going over and tell Bent Hickman that *I* appreciate my sister's life enough to thank him for saving it. I'll —"

The girl was blushing at the rebuke, but she sprang before him as he grabbed his hat and whip, and she raised her hand as her head sank on one side like a wilted flower. Her lashes swung low a moment, and a tear started. Then

she looked up, and a prayer broke forth in the tone and inflection only of the word, "Brother!"

And the jolly, boisterous fellow went limp with a thrill, and kissed her, and thought that perhaps he could manage a case in court — other persons' law affairs, but other people's love affairs — ?

"Dogged, if they don't stump me," he muttered, as the sister pushed him into a chair.

"But if I *meet* Bent I'll —" and a mischievous threat was in his face, and a great horror in hers again, as she thought of the awful mess he might make of it.

"Uncle George," she called out gently, "brother says you can put the horse up now."

More and more the girl strolled and observed and sketched, consoling herself with her little art. Now that the Indian summer had come, she climbed sometimes to the back part of the farm that she might see the softer mists shimmer over the woods and define the prairie expanse beyond, whither she gazed and wondered. In all her walks she kept away from the roads.

A springlike warmth had come again to the

failing season — reviving grass and twigs, and causing here and there a fruit tree to unfold its flower buds, which had been so snugly tucked in for the winter ; and untimely blooms of white or pink were sometimes blended with the blushing leaf. The moving, sentient things felt the regenerating influence, a sort of final struggle of the year before it begins to die. The turkeys strutted and gobbled and fought and courted ; and the apron with which Nannie gathered up the eggs was unusually burdened by the output of the early pullets.

She had come in from one of these egg hunts one afternoon when her mother said :—

“Nan, I been uh seein’ that ole yaller turkey hen comin’ from way up the lane uh good deal uh late, a kinder creepin’, like she’d laid up there some’ers. Sometimes they *do* lay this late. No need uh tryin’ to raise uh brood now — they’d freeze ; for nothin’ chills like uh young turkey. Put on your sunbonnet, honey, and go up on this side and look under thuh fence-stakes — inside stakes, mind you — and see if you can’t find thuh nest. I think she’s up there now some’ers — perhaps over the hill uh piece — maybe along the turn uh the big road.”

The girl started. There was the same pretty haze on the hills and the same thrill at all the view opened to her. She stooped into the corners, where the wild crabs had grown and had dropped their astringent emerald fruit, so thickly strewn that the air about was redolent with their oily, malic odor. She carried one and smelled at it.

In some corners the greenbriers writhed in sinuous, thorny, verdant strands, or threading themselves through the panels they stretched from rail to rail; and it took much peeking this way and that to see the earth in the snug corner behind the tangle.

In other places she parted the coral bushes in an easy investigation, or shook the glassy-colored pappus from the silkweed pod, leaving the white glossy slickness of the husks inside in strong contrast with the rough, drab exterior. The blackberry bramble, in brown mahogany, was insistent in its grasp, and the wild black raspberry cane, in purer red, stretched out its lithe length, whitened with a bluish bloom, as if it had powdered its too blushing front, to greet her.

She came to the big road at last without find-

ing the nest; and she turned up the staked and ridered worm fence that ran along it. An old osage orange hedge straggled thinly by the other—a remnant of an early effort and a failure; and its large green, granulated, useless, yet attractive, fruit lay here and there in the gray matting of leaves and weeds. Between these hedge trees and the worm fence she made her way with difficulty and was growing fretful at the frequent thorny reach which so hampered and hindered her, as she turned the outer angles.

Suddenly she almost stepped upon a flock of quails. They all flew up so explosively that her heart stopped a moment at the fright; and one struck a projecting fence-stake and fell limp and breathless at her feet. She stopped and picked it up and stroked her hand over the pretty brown and ochre plumage, and felt her heart soften and her conscience smite her, that she should have been the cause of its death.

She put the bird tenderly into her apron, and soon she was beyond the extent of the hedge, and found a yellow feather.

Here for a while the smoother vines had the corners. The trumpet creeper had climbed

the stakes and dropped its leaves early, leaving the sharp tips of the year's growth projecting fretfully upward beyond the support, as if the plant were irritated at its shortened aspirations; but the Virginia fireleaf bunched itself in placid knobs of scarlet foliage, where it could climb no farther—accepting the situation, and the wild grape—content to run when it could not rise—swung in flat festoons from panel to panel, as a spider spins its web.

She stopped a moment and gazed back at this pretty foreground to the narrowing stretch of the lane toward the bend into the woods behind her—a picture indeed, if only something were moving along the road.

At last she came to some fence-corners where the sumacs only stood erect with the black bunches of their acid fruit brushing harmlessly by her and shattering down the seeds upon the leaves already fallen; and beyond in a deep snarl of almost everything she saw the nest.

She dived rather than stooped as she reached down and put the eggs into her apron with the quail; and when she attempted to back out, she found she could not. Some raspberry stems, tipping their ends to renew their youth,

caught most lovingly at the fair picture of young life that bent beneath their arches. The blackberries and woodbine, the wild grape and the dogrose, held on to her as if they had found a worthy associate for their next year's bloom and fruit, and were going to keep it. Even the old rail fence had a stake thrust detainingly over her shoulders.

Her struggles were growing very painful as she felt the lacerations of the thorns upon her thinly clad form. Her bonnet was over her eyes, her head was flushing hot with her position and her impatience. She paused a moment to get her breath and wonder how she should renew the struggle, when she thought she heard a four-footed shuffle in the grass over the fence.

Suddenly a voice above her said:—

“Wait a moment and I'll help you.”

She heard a strong-springed jackknife click as it opened, and then a mooring loosened here at a gentle slash—another there—and others still, easing her strained position—and somehow within her soul—somewhere—snarly, thorny things were slipping—letting go—and—knotty lines were slackening—loosen-

ing — snapping — bit by bit — and — then the words:—

“I can’t cut the fence-stake, little girl; I reckon you’ll have to back out from under something.”

And she backed from beneath the stake with bonnet much awry, and turned up to the horseman, yet mounted above her, a grateful, blushing face.

“What are you doing here in the highways and hedges?” he asked.

“Looking for the lost,” she said, catching his spirit; “and I’ve found them — see,” opening her apron to his glance.

She thought she saw the quail move. It might have been the shaking only of her hands.

“I didn’t know you’d lost anything. If you had been talking of me or the turkey there now —” he said, “I’d know.”

“Have any of your stock got — out, Bent?” she said, with genuine interest and innocence.

“Well not exactly stock, but — uh — I owned something once, or thought I did, and I valued it ’cause I’d had it a long time, and it got away from me.”

He looked away as if searching.

"Haven't you ever heard of it, Bent? Do you know where it is, I mean?"

"I don't know where it is 'cause maybe it isn't anywhere. I know who had it last, and—"

"And wont they give it up or tell you where it is? Why, that's mean," she said, her face sobering and flashing a little.

"Well, it wasn't given to me for good-an'-always, maybe. They thought I didn't deserve to keep it." He looked away again up the road.

"'Spect I'd better be a riding on. Good—"

And he turned his horse's head.

"B-E-N-N-N-T!"

In an instant the stiff bit was rattling over the rider rail again.

"Do you sup-pup-up-pose I'm going to let you go away—go away—without thanking you for helping me now and for saving me that day? Why, everybody says I never would have come up, because I'd fainted, and you risked your life, and left your—your immersion to come to me. They say your *soul* wasn't thought of by you when you saw my *body* going down!"

He did not move or speak, but sat stolid at her gratitude. She put the hand that did not hold her apron upon the top rail, set the tip

of one foot in the fence crack, and gazed earnestly into his face. How often when she was a child had he seen her run out bareheaded and climb the yard fence up to him thus, as he rode up to her father's house!

"Why, Bent, uh—huh—hunh—that day upon the way and on the stiles—you know, Bent—that day upon the stiles! I was not well and was not right—I did not *mean* to—"

Her head hung low a moment, then came up again, and she put the other foot between the rails and was nearer him.

"Why, I don't care now whether you're baptized or I'm baptized— Oh, yes, I do—but you know what I mean—you *know*, don't you, Bent?"

Her eyes were praying into his now, and a little gurgle, like a baby's coo, was bubbling in her throat.

He saw her heart-blood dam itself in her face and dye her very soul there in scarlet, and saw it all set back again with a gasp, as her lips parted in her dread. Then he said:—

"Why, little girl, we were baptized together by the providence of God—you and I—and 'what God has joined together'—"

(She climbed another rail and reached out for the stake which leant toward him.)

“ ‘let no man put’ — ”

But she turned such a radiant countenance so fully up to him and so near him that he stopped, revelled in it a moment, then leant a little toward it, and . . . the broad leathers in his stirrup on the fenceward side creaked loudly as if under special strain, and the old turkey, creeping to her desecrated home and peeping above the tall weeds, saw silhouetted against the haze a sunbonnet with a very skyward slant, and a slouch hat, with a rakish backward set, fitting it as an overflowing lid.

“Quit, quit, qu-e-e-r-r-r!” said the turkey, and the boy slid from his saddle to his feet.

He held her free hand a moment now, and the girl stepped on up, rail by rail, till she neared the top; then she bent down and forward till her elbows were in his palms, and she felt again the vibrations of his strained tendons as he lifted her above the fence and set her upon the ground without a jostle.

When he had slipped his arm through the reins to lead his horse, and was walking beside her down the road, she said, half fearfully:—

“Are you going on after your — uh — stuff now, Bent?”

There was something — not his bridle — pulling a little at the other arm just then.

“Why, no,” he said slyly. “They’ve brought the whole contraption back!”

And the bird, which she thought was dead, crept to her apron’s edge, looked out a little dazed, and whirled away across the fields.

XIII

"Always he could look across at the timber streak and feel that she was there to welcome him, . . . but now —"

THE oracle was still succeeding. His bank account was beyond his bachelor needs. He was a little extravagant with the Methodist beauty, but he did not, with modern recklessness, spend a month's salary in a night.

He, too, once had denominational proclivities, but he found them in his way. If his chosen profession is a favorite route to the wreck of much of the finer things which hold us still this side of the depths, Dick's was not a nature apt to miss the regular connections. He got the impression early, which so many little minds of his ilk are apt to get, that being mean in trying cases was being brilliant; and the man who is mean for pay can scarcely be expected to be very good for principle.

There were some things, however, which tended to hold him to his best impulses, and

among these were his devotion to his sister, his loyalty to his family, and his strong friendship for Bent Hickman.

To those who could fathom these, it seemed that they might work out in him their good tendencies and lift him yet. But there were others who shook their heads.

Dick's success with the girls had been phenomenally bad—in no comparison with his progress elsewhere. It was perhaps because he based it too largely upon business principles, or that the businesslike considerations only were on the other side sometimes.

When he next rode out to see his folks he was again much impressed with the sketches of his sister, some of which he had just seen for the first time. He declared his firm conviction at the table—the usual place from which he issued his proclamations—that Nannie ought to go to school in town right away, and he added that, if the father did not have the ready money, why, he himself could furnish it. He was very proud of this chance to show his ability to help his family.

“You sent me off to school, father, when it

straitened you, and I'm sure I ought to be willing to help now."

Aside from this he was sincerely interested in his sister.

The question was debated for and against.

"I don't see how I can hardly spare her," said the mother. "I'd miss her company so much."

"I'm afraid I could not pay you back very soon, Dick," said the father. "Them steers, you know, I want to keep till they are three years old; the mules will not be ready to go fer a year yet. The hawgs are fer family expenses. But if yuh want ter take yer chances with ther old man — why, I expect Nannie ought to go — if — if you think so."

And he choked a little at the thought of losing for a while his baby girl.

When Bent called again it was all settled; and he rode home that night with a sore heart; for, while there had been voluntary separations, before this, they were always of short duration, and were usually such as he could break, at any time, if he chose. Always he could look across at the timber streak, and feel that she was there — there nearly all her life to welcome him when he came, but now — gone till June! Well, if it

was for her good he could stand it—and he bowed his head and rode on.

The school in town was struggling, calling itself a college when it was scarcely an academy; but its curriculum would still greatly help Nannie. She was to board in the building; and with her scant wardrobe her father hauled her in one bright day and delivered her over to Dick—thereby feeling that he had done his whole duty and shifted all responsibility.

Dick took her up and arranged for her course of study. One thing was understood, that she must be instructed in drawing.

The brother kissed her and bade her adieu, saying that his office was only a little way down street,—that she knew where it was, and must send for him if she was sick or needing anything; but, in spite of this, tears rose in Nannie's eyes, and he went off down the walk blowing his nose in rivalry with the carding mill whistle just over the hill.

“If you will come with me,” said the president, “I will introduce you to the matron and she will show you your room. I will have your baggage sent up shortly.”

Coming so long after the term had begun, Nannie was the "new girl" indeed, so new that she was lonely, for all the others had made their friends—chosen their special chums, and formed their little cliques and circles. She found her position, out of the classroom, a trying one. She realized not only her lateness, but that there was a crudeness in her manners, a plainness in her speech, and a scantness in both the style and quality of her clothes. For these reasons she was doubly shy, and had a reserve, always dignified, which piqued those who tried to approach her.

But a few days only in the schoolroom sufficed to show her teacher and fellow-pupils this girl's great worth as a student, and her sincere thirst to know. She stood secure in her power in this respect—self-possessed, aggressive. She had had a good education, so far as the country school of that day went. In some lines her knowledge was beyond that taught in her classes here. So apt was she that the other girls found her a very useful helper, and her sweet willingness was so modest and unostentatious that they began to love her for what she was, as well as for what she could do.

Her late arrival had deprived her of a roommate ; and she had a small apartment at the end of the hall. From this, a single window looked out westward over a wide reach of fields and farm lanes, with herds sprinkled over them, or along them, here and there, while the shock-rows climbed the gentle slopes in checkered phalanxes, as if agricultural progress really marched upon the swells.

Her loneliness, after she had tired of study, was something dreadful ; and when she gazed out over this view it soothed her. As she sat and watched the sun go down behind this homeward sweep, she envied it its journey, and realized what Bent had felt when he had so often told of his sending her a wish of welfare upon the great golden ball. Nearer in there was a lane running past the college grounds, and beyond this some straggling trees in a pasture. Further still was the fringed outline of the creek, pencilled now in twiggy oaks—their upper margin rather bluish and blending into the tawny monotony of the persisting leaves.

The only railroad which the village had ran through this vista, and gashed it here with a

cut — the excavated soil rumpling the swells — or ridged it there with ochrey clay — bare yet in its newness, but bold in its suggestiveness of directness and speed. Where the creek made a bend townward, a bridge spanned it; and the tracery of the wooden trusses lay like a bit of ecru lace against the brown woods of the bottom. Beyond this the road had showed itself again upon a high embankment, and then it crossed the swamp on a curve of piling, as if it stepped on stilts, and was gone.

Sometimes the lonely girl watched this view for the coming train whose rumble warned her expectation. The steam, white in the autumn air, showed the engine's path far beyond the woods — on the prairie yet; and the brown coaches later made a new shifting background for the lacing of the trusses.

The outlook never tired her. Often, in her loneliness, she fancied Bent coming home on this train; or that Dick was going out on that; and there was even a cheerfulness in the engine's murmur beneath her window, and a kind of inspiration in its powerful rush.

By and by the girls grew into the habit of entering her den in romping flocks; and they

found the quaintest little pencil sketches pinned about it here and there. They asked her who did them for her, and she said, "A friend." Then they grew more interested, and thought that if she had a friend who could sketch like that, why, perhaps after all she was not so common and poorly connected.

Daily she took her drawing lessons from her teacher — copied studies of fruit, flowers, leaves, buds, branches, grasses; had Venuses, Apollos, Mercurys, Cupids, and sundry heads to outline from plaster casts; drew pitchers, mugs, vases, etc., a little better than the rest, and put her daily grade in other work near or at the upper limit.

XIV

“Pedestal! Bah!” said Dick, “a man in love is bed-rock to the everlasting depths.”

NANNIE began to grow fearfully homesick. She was almost desperate when Dick drove up one Friday afternoon and took her home. The next evening Bent called and stayed all night, as the country custom was, since he was a boy.

The Sunday following he went with her to her own church, rousing high hopes there as he had often done before, in the same manner that she had roused similar hopes at Prairie View.

That afternoon he drove her back to town; but Nannie made him put her out away down the street, and she walked up to the college, as if she had come from Dick's boarding-house. She would not have had the girls know about Bent for worlds — she dreaded their teasing so. She did not see how they could admit so openly

to a stranger their strong liking for this boy or that, and scheme so for his favor.

But more and more from this on she thought of Bent, and missed so much his regular visits and the possibility of seeing him pass the pasture gate on the easy swing of his pony's walk, or hear the loud report of his whip, as he zigzagged the lanes driving home his purchases. The road that ran under her window was one of the ways by which he often came into town. She looked out one day and saw a herd of cattle coming, and behind it a horse following, with an empty saddle, and a dog trotting with lolling tongue.

She knew that on the other side Bent was walking, for she had often seen the three driving unruly stock in that way. She leant out and peeped till she saw him, and then dodged back, for fear that he might see her and smile or bow, when woe unto all her hopes of peace!

Then she had her period of remorse; and in this she felt that she could rise up and go out to him. Some one had told her that the boys were not allowed to visit the girls, nor were the girls permitted to speak, or even bow, to the boys, if they met them.

"If you meet your beau upon the street,

you must not notice him," one said; and she imagined Bent down street, wandering aimlessly about, wanting to speak to her, and her hardening her heart, according to college precept, so that even her eye should not turn in his direction; then she began to *want* to see him—to say something to him, anything—just because she could not.

One night shortly after this Dick called on her, lightening her heart with his jolly presence. He received the sly peeps of the girls from behind the doors with many demonstrations of satisfaction, and he peeped back at them with as much apparent interest. It reminded him of his youth, he said, when he was at college in a town where there was also a school for girls, a little like this one.

He had been talking clownishly to amuse his sister, and ranting about his own need of a sweetheart and his poor luck in winning and retaining affection, when he broke out:—

"Say, Nan, do you know Bent Hickman is the luckiest fellow in all the county?"

"Yes, they say he's a good buyer and—"

"Oh, get out! He's lucky in what he has given to him—not in what he buys. He's—"

"Has some one left him something, Dick?"

"Stuff, girl! You can't take a hint in slippery elm water!"

She opened her eyes a little.

"Here I've been all my life hustling for a sweetheart, and then don't know whether I've half got one, or got half a one, but he's had the love of the sweetest girl always —"

"Hush, Dick!"

"If she wasn't my sister, I'd envy him. If some girl would love me that way! Why, Nannie, if I had the confidence of such a girl, I'd — I'd —"

"Still be Dick," she said.

"Well, ye-h-s," he mused, dropping into a seat, for he had been walking about nervously. "Yes, I'd be Dick; but it would be Dick with an annex — no, a pedestal. On that love I'd mount —"

"Try being the pedestal yourself a while, Dick, and let her mount."

He sobered instantly.

"Golly! I never thought of that. Nan, you're a brick — a flagstone. No — a monolith, end up on its base — a Cleopatra's Needle, hieroglyphs and all; but I read you. Bent will

have to get a ladder, an elevator, or fly a kite and string over you, and hire a commentary — no, an antiquary, I mean — to realize all there is of you. Poor Bent! Say, Nannie,” he added, after a little, “wouldn’t you like to write to Bent occasionally? I’ll take a note for you, and this old college ‘prex’ need ever be the wiser. I can get permission for him to call if —”

“Oh, no — no, no, Dick,” she said, thinking of that battery of eyes in the hall, and the volleys of taunts afterward. “Don’t you hint such a thing to Bent. The girls would tease me to death.”

“Then write him a note and make it strong. He’s been awfully sad of late. He was in town the other day, and I saw his hat fly off in a dead calm.”

“What!”

“Yes. It’s a sad story. Stepped on his lower lip, you know, — he’s so down-at-the-mouth, and —”

“Oh, Dick, you’re such a goose!”

“Fact, I swear it; and it flew up, — his lip did —”

“Shut up!”

“ — and hit him between the eyes, and —”

"Oh, stop!"

"— he's not just been himself since — is sort of dazed and loony, they say. Paid old Johnson double price for his pigs; and, I tell you, my girl, when Bent Hickman pays too much for pigs —"

But she laughed out at him and touched her tongue to the pencil, which he had handed her, and hesitated. He had reached his note-book also toward her.

"I don't know what to write."

"Say 'My Dear Bent,' capital D to the 'dear.'"

"I think I'll let him write me first," she said, dropping her hand in her lap.

"Yes, do; and have it come through the mail, and the president get it, and have you up and ask questions about 'this young man, Miss Ditmer.'"

"Well, then, I don't *want* him to write."

"That's it! That's you women! Let a fellow make a door-mat of his lower lip, and then you want to make a flagstone for yourselves out of the rest of him — get him down and walk all over him. Nan, you are a — a — a diplomatist. Softest thing to call you that I can think of now, my dear."

"What's that?"

"What every woman is, when a man's a stepping-stone. Pedestal, bah! a man in love is bed-rock — solid as the everlasting depths!"

"There's the retiring bell, Dick. You know what that means."

"Ah, hope cut short in days of yore!" he said melodramatically. "Now, Nan, find me a girl, and tell her if she'll love me, she can be the shining light—the tower; and I'll be the concrete foundation — nay, the bed-rock beneath the sand."

Nannie went with him to the door, and saw him out as he bowed half clownishly to the various eyes set edgeways in the slightly opened doors along the hall. She knew him well enough to know that there was a large mixture of seriousness in the silly things he had said of himself and Bent. It worried her a bit as she turned to her room and met the simperings of her friends about the charms of her brother. One especially, a Miss Leighton, was delighted with him; but she was not the kind of a girl Nannie was going to allow her brother to "bed-rock" himself to.

XV

"Ah ! . . . from what has not the click of the door-latch saved us !"

It is wonderful to note the contempt which the woman whose affections are fully satisfied feels for the aching void in her unsatisfied sisters. Nannie would have striven to fill the empty stomach of any beggar of either sex, but that any woman besides herself should want for love had scarcely dawned on her. Yet she was deeply sympathetic with Dick in a similar distress — and particularly with — Bent.

Her homesickness now was yielding a little to the pleasant anticipation of the nearing Christmas, with its release from care. It had an interest this year that she had never felt in it before. There was not the mere glamor of the social party, the kissing play, the crude wit and humor — the fun so-called ; but just the relaxation of rest mid home scenes — and — and the visits of one's friends.

She was very, very tired, for she had studied hard, and was very nervous—at times tearful and almost hysterical in her moods,—with her sentiment refined and made very acute thereby.

Dick would be there, part of the time, with a present, always worthy of his success—an index of it, year by year enhancing; and there would be another from *somebody* with so much regard—a book perhaps with some sentiment marked.

And if it snowed! Oh, if it snowed! Bent's cutter was so nice and—and narrow; you could not shy toward the runner if you wished—there was not room. And that team before that sleigh!

Very broad hints had come to Nannie that she might invite a sister pupil home with her to spend the holidays; for the hinter thought of Dick. But Nannie thought of Bent, in many ways in this connection—the main thing being that she did not want the girls to know about him yet.

In this mood she went home when the happy days came. It was so pleasant to have him to herself so much—his whole simple self—so genuine in contrast with so much that was artificial among the girls. It was restful to be free from all yearning for him, because he was there

now in such fulness and substantiality. She had never known the shadow of the great unknown one—perhaps the ever unknown one—which haunts the dreams of every maiden. The thing seemed to be settled. Her mother smiled upon her lover in a maternal way, and her father?—why his delight was simply that of an affair admirably arranged.

One day, when the snow was on, Dick came out, and sent the old, long-ago challenge to Bent to come over and take a Christmas hunt with him the next day. When Hickman came, Dick said:—

“Benton, old boy, I’ll take you out to-day and show you how it’s done again. You know I used to lay it over you—and—well you’ve been riding a great deal of late, but a poor man, like myself, walks. Your legs are a little weak, I reckon. Sorry your gun is single. My double-barrel gives me too much advantage.”

“Well, I’ll watch you shoot to-day,” said Bent. “I can hunt any time.”

At a rather late dinner hour, however, Nannie looked out and saw Bent bending forward under a load of game, but striding high and

easily, and turning now and then and waiting. Behind him came her brother, with a kind of waddling limp, dragging great trenches in the snow with his tired feet, and swinging by its long legs a single rabbit.

"Bent had the luck on me," he said, as he stamped in. "Everything got up on his side of the fence or brushpile. I could have killed more, however, but I did not want to carry them. Lord! my feet are worn off at the knees!"

And he set up his gun in the corner beside the door, but Bent hung his on the rack in the hall. Here, as the latter slung up his shot-sack, he found Nannie, tiptoeing to hang Dick's powder-flask, and her slim waist thus stretched was very tempting. She read his eyes and put up her hands to ward him off. He grabbed her wrists and saw her teeth glinting and set together in admiration, even as she fended his advances. In their little love-struggle, their eyes were sparkling, their breath halting, when Mother Ditmer came out, blind to everything but the bottle of Mustang Liniment and the turkey feather with which to soothe Dick's blistered feet.

Ah, all-of-us! From what, as we have stood in the hall, has not the click of the door-latch saved us! Of what has it not deprived us—what has it not opened unto us!

XVI

"Look here, Nannie, did you ever take me for a fool?"

THE lovers parted that afternoon with an engagement to go at night to a party far over on the Limestone where Bent had relatives who expected him, and had asked him to bring his girl.

It was to be a dance, but neither indulged in this amusement, though they liked the fiddling and the fun generally—and the long, uninterrupted drive. It had thawed a little that day in the pretty winter sunshine, and the icicles hung, like a glassy fringe, from the eaves of the houses as the night drew on.

They started early, before dark, for it was a long way. Going over he had told her how lonely it had been without her, especially on Sundays, and how often he had felt that he would give a steer to see her and say something to her.

"Dick was saying to me once," he began,

"that I could — through him, being your brother, you know — that I could —"

"Oh, no, no, you couldn't, Bent; not yet —"

"Why?" — a lot of lost hope in the query.

"Because — because the president would not like it."

"But he needn't know, Dick says —"

"Oh, yes, he must know, and — and —"

"But Dick says —"

"Yes, I know, but it must not be, Bent, it won't do at all."

"I'm sorry," he said, with a deep sigh. "I don't want to worry you, but I'm awful lonely."

There was silence for a season till they neared the house. When they could hear the deep "thump, thump" of the country quadrille upon the bare floor, she said: —

"Say, Bent."

"Yes."

"You are not mad, are you?"

"No."

"Sad, then?"

"Yes, a little sad."

"Well — well, I'll tell you; I'll come out often — real often."

"Do," he said.

"And I'll be awfully good, you know, to make up."

"Up for what?"

"For not being agreeable a while ago."

"Oh, yes. Well, I'll be glad to see you."

"Now, *you* know."

"Yes, same old place, third house north of Prairie View."

"Be-n-nt!" shaking him.

"Saturdays, say?"

"You know what I mean!"

"Think I do. Will you drop me a line, so I can be at home?"

"I'll be at *my* home, goosey."

"Oh, yes, you might go on over — while I run out and feed, you know. I'll let you ride over a little while."

He broke into a loud, happy laugh before she got through pounding him, as he had seen her do in mock anger so often when a child.

But he sobered suddenly and cut viciously at the off horse with his whip.

"Look here, Nannie, did you ever take me for a fool?"

"Why no, Bent" — a hint of fright in her voice.

"You thought I wanted to come to see you in your school — as Dick did, didn't you?"

"Yes, but —"

"Well, I did — and I didn't. What I was talking about was —"

"Oh, Bent! and I —"

"Listen a minute: I can't think of the place where I'd be ashamed of you. I would not care for anybody's opinion but yours. If we stood at judgment together, and the book of my life was opened, I'd *smile* into the face of Jesus Christ and *blush* up into yours — at your estimation of me."

"But, Bent, I —"

"I know. I thought differently of you, Nannie. I saw how afraid you were that time — afraid that I would haul you clear up to the college. I knew how you felt and I respected it, but it cut. Say, I'm done going to school except in this hard world; you're just beginning. If you feel that you're going to be ashamed of your old sweetheart — don't you think you'd better — uh — ah —"

"Don't talk so, Bent —"

Then some other drivers shouted, that he should not collide with them, and their journey was at an end.

They went in silently together, and when she came from the wrap-room and looked around, he was talking to a young man, taller, awkward, and more angular than himself, but with a singularly sincere face. This latter's name was Hoyle, and he had visited Nannie a time or two in a desultory way.

Later that evening Hoyle saw her, and went to her; and Bent strolled off to some other group, and she saw very little more of him during the party—except at long range.

Besides the dancing, there were, in another room, plays of forfeits and “heavy, heavy hangs over your head,” with the usual ridiculous penalties. Once Bent and Nannie were in the same game, and he was doomed to kiss his sweetheart or lose his favorite clasp-knife. He caught a little miss of fourteen summers, whom he chanced to know, and kissed her. While Nannie knew that it was delicacy which bade him do this, she could not, for her life, help feeling a little queer about it; and though she would not, for any consideration, have had him choose her under the circumstances, she could not feel just thoroughly happy because he did not. She wondered if he were ashamed, among

his people, to acknowledge her as his sweetheart. Then, she could almost gauge his feelings by her own in town—except that her second judgment told her that in his manliness he could not harbor such a thought.

XVII

“‘Dreams are nothing. It's the real thing that hurts,’ he said.”

ALTHOUGH other young men besides Hoyle had come about Nannie that night, yet, when the time came to go home, and she had bidden Bent's relatives good-night, she felt far from satisfied with her evening, or the outlook. She had been at many of these parties recently, up late on successive nights, and she was therefore very tired and sleepy, with little mines of nervous explosiveness slumbering here and there in all her weariness, ready to be touched off by any sudden jar or friction.

At last they started homeward in the snappy, frosty air of the pretty night. The moon, half-waned, had risen, and the wind was up with it, fresh from the north, — a gale blowing scuds of cloud across the prairie sky. It was getting much, very much, colder. The horses were chilled, and bent their heads low to the blasts, as they breasted them; and their well-shod

heels shot missiles of ice against the dashboard with iterant patter. How their feet crunched into the frozen snow, and the steel toe-clips cut with a biting grate into the smooth ice, frozen anew from the day's melting!

Bent's harness did not have bells about it, but there was a melody and rhythm in all these sounds, as the cry of the runners creaked out, and they crushed and cut the hummocks of ice beneath. Sometimes he drove out on the side of the road, where the snow was deep, and the upturned curves of steel crashed through the crust with a pleasant munch, or mounted upon it with a sweet musical slur, as if they were metallic bows drawn deftly across the rosined bosom of the earth.

Snug behind the buffalo robe and other things, they nestled down. There was little need of driving; the horses knew the way. Their home was beyond Nannie's, and in going there they thought they were going to their own stalls.

"Chep, chep, chep, chep, cheppy, cheppy, cheppy, chep, chep, chep," — the sharp corks melodiously cut the frozen way, while the gliding motion, so swift and smooth, put both riders

nearly half asleep, or in that restful mood which is conscious to nothing but emergencies. He pulled his "comfort" so that his eyes only were out, and her "nubia" also was well about her head. The conversation for a while had been short and jerky; but now there was not a word, not a movement—just the feel of the full length of each beside the other, the throbbing warmth beneath, the steamy breath above, shooting far out, and mingling with the vapory snorts of the eager team.

At last the man was aroused to a knowledge of the silence, by the necessity of guiding a little where the road was rough. He straightened forward to look over the dashboard. When the way was smooth again, he leaned over and peeked down deep into the wraps which were about the girl's face, and thought of the bright eyes and pretty smile which he had so often found nestling there on such occasions. He parted the coverings tenderly, as one looks at a sleeping babe; but her veil baffled his vision.

"Nannie," he said softly, "Nannie?" but no reply. He bent his ear, and knew by her breathing that she was sleeping—sleeping beside him alone, away out in the prairie night;

and he spread the things about her face again and leaned back.

There was something in her trustful slumber now that touched him. When a little thing, one time, as the dark came on, she had climbed into his lap, and, nestling down, had gone to sleep before the old log fire in her father's home; and he had later taken her and laid her down upon the near-by bed-lounge, and bent his head low beside her face for a while till the little arm, which had grasped him as he rose, slipped in securer slumber from about his neck. When he had spread over her his overcoat, the new coat of "full cloth" which he was so proud of, and had seen her stretch and breathe deeply and go off again into rest, he tiptoed softly back to Dick and the others by the hearth. He recalled how proud he was that he had got the baby to sleep, and now — she was sleeping by him in that same sweet innocence.

He was a bigger boy after that, he felt, when he had soothed her infant weariness, with her curls lapping over his arm; and now as the sleigh lurched and her head was upon his shoulder again, he was a bigger man, God helping him, and a better one. He hadn't prayed for

months, for his faith had slipped a little with his creed; but now he looked up at the cold stars, and a tear started on his cheek as he asked strength from out of the great, orderly upper depths that he might ever be able to do what was best for her, and treat her right — the one who had so far given him her whole heart and trust — the one who had always been his “little girl.” He could almost wish that she was such — and only such — again.

He came shortly to a place where a pasture had been fenced across the prairie “near-cut road”; but it was pierced by two gates, and he got out to open the first one. He propped it back and led the sweating horses through, and then there came a slight dilemma. Would they stand, steaming in this piercing gale, till he could close the gate? It would not do to leave it open, hoping that some one coming after might shut it; for usually there were important herds in there, and they might escape. He could hitch the team to the fence; but no, there were deep drifts there, out of which he could not back or turn the sleigh. He stepped to the horses’ heads, patted them and rubbed their noses, but he did not like the manner in which they

tossed his touches up. He stole back, kicked out the prop, and, as he strained to slip the bit of chain over the stubborn nail-head, he heard them start. He shouted, but they quickened and went on, with him running after. There was a dangerous twist in the sloping banks of the "draw" near the pasture's middle, and—they just *might* make it without upsetting, but—and he ran, and prayed, and panted, and took near cuts, and stumbled into snow drifts, and floundered out, and ran, and prayed, and panted, again, till he reached the swell-top: and there, quiet in the moonlight, with the two tall posts projecting above them, the horses stood awaiting the opening of the other outgoing gate. What if the sleigh had turned over at the "draw"? But it had not, and he shut out the thought in his gratitude that it had not.

He stepped quickly to her side. She was still asleep and because she had so trusted him, he hated to wake her up. He stooped over her, parting the wraps again, and lifted the veil a moment, and the sweet peaceful face lay deep down there in its coverings, like a fledgling in its nest. In the impulse of his gratitude he bent to kiss it—perhaps for the last time, he

thought. He could not help it, and she need never know — never know what the resolution to the stars was costing him, and what a sacrifice was in this caress.

Just then he found that icicles of his frozen breath were on his mustache, and he pulled down the veil again and kissed the borders of her hair *through it*.

She drew a long sigh, and stretched in an evident swell beneath the robe, and awakened.

"Is — is that you, Bent?"

"Yes, will you hold the lines a moment while I open the gate?"

"Yes, where are we?"

"Just going out of Brinker's pasture."

"Have I been asleep?"

"Yes, I guess you have. You haven't said a word for miles."

"I'm sorry, Bent, but I was *so* tired. I did not know when we passed the other gate."

He did not answer, but was grateful.

"I had a dream, I reckon it was, Bent. It was so funny."

"Yes?"

"I'd like to tell it to you if it won't worry you. I don't mind dreams, do *you*?"

"No," he said, half hesitatingly, "some dreams."

"Why, what are you panting about, Bent?"

"I've been walking — feet got cold."

"It is not clear to me at all — my dream, I mean. I thought somehow — somewhere, that you had left me for a moment — to make the way clearer and easier for me — some sort of way, I don't know what; and as you did that, I left you. I did not want to, but something, somebody, came along and snatched me from you, and — and you were behind." Her voice was breaking now. "That you quit that work, and ran after me, stumbling, falling, praying, for my safety, and — and that something stopped me as I went toppling — stopped me till you came up, and — and then there was that about yourself, Bent, which kept you from me — you so feared that you might do me harm. You would not hurt me, would you, Bent? No — no — don't answer that. And then you opened another way for me, and we went through — you leading out into a better way — together, together!"

She was almost crying now.

"And, Bent, I helped you a little — and — and would have helped you more but you would not let me help you *much*."

She broke into a sob. "There, there!" he said soothingly. "I would not mind. It is only a dream — and — and its not a bad dream. You're tired. You *shall* help me all you can."

He stepped forward to open the gate. It swung back of itself, and lodged against a snowdrift.

He led the horses through, she holding to the lines, — and he walked across the lane and tied the team to the fence where there were no drifts. Then he went back and shut the gate.

"Bent, why did you lead and tie the horses? I could have driven them through and held them."

"It is a little cold to-night, and they are rather frisky," he replied, "and you might go on and really leave me," he laughed sillily.

He stamped his boots against the runners, to shake off the snow, and climbed in, nestling against the sharp wind ; for it was a "big road" now, for a few miles, till they turned off. They started.

"Bent, there are no more gates to go through now, are there?"

"Not till we get home — at the pasture."

"This is the big road now, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's smoother from this on, for a while, then there's the long lonesome home-stretch, you know."

"Not lonesome with me, Bent!"

"No, not with you, if you keep awake."

"But it will be when I'm gone again?"

"Yes, very."

"Bent?"

"Yes."

"You can *write* to me — WRITE to me, you know, but you can't —"

"Can't what?"

"Can't come. The rules do not permit it, and then the girls — would —"

"Would tease you about your gawky country beau," he broke in.

She hung her head, shrank down deep into her wraps, and was silent long. She looked out at him, and his great head and shoulders were cut clear against the steely "upper deep," as he leant this way and that to note the track in the rough lane. There was something very determined in the pose.

Shortly he heard her sob, and before he thought he turned and gave a soothing touch to the robes.

"Bent, I feel so queer to-night! I want to laugh and cry. It is my dream, I reckon. It worries me."

"Dreams are nothing. It's the real thing which hurts," he said.

"Do you fear pain, Bent? I thought maybe only a girl suffers in her dread. Forgive me, I should not have asked. I feel so foolish, such a little child to-night—a baby, and you are so big and strong and good to me. Please forget!"

And from the depths she grasped his arm, hand over hand, her face turned sweetly upward and reaching, her veil lifted now. But he looked not her way, and he saw only a hare glide slyly through the fence, and far down the lane in the moonlight a fox, with his nose well to the snow, skulk out of the glistening road.

XVIII

“ My sister says you struck her. ”

THE girl had shrunk back into the robes, and sat silent as if she had been stunned ; but the boy towered stolid in his driving. It was no pettish mood he was in. He had done what he then thought was best. If she were going to be ashamed of him why — But he did not think out the undefined thing in his mind. The girl now, limp from her blow, had not force enough to do anything but ride.

Finally he noticed that it was much colder still ; he would like to stamp his feet and swing his arms. Anon a chill ran over him and his teeth chattered. The squeak of the runners was louder, clearer, and more highly pitched, the horses shook their manes, and the wind was due north now and cutting, as if its edge were tempered steel. Later he had to rouse himself, and he felt a draught sweep around his knees. Farther on he leaned down to fix the robes, and

found a lifted place on Nannie's side, where the terrible gusts were whistling in. As he tucked in the wraps, he touched her foot, and her shoe was like an icicle. He asked her if she was warm, and she murmured something which he did not understand, but he did not again inquire, because he feared she would expose her face to make him hear.

"Check, check, check, check, checky-checky, checky-checky, check, check, check, check,"—the frost-nails sang out the good grip which they had upon the icy paths, and "Soo-o-o-wee-eeih," the slick steel-shod runners hissed upon the icy hummocks and "chumped" into the crystal ruts again. Higher, shriller, more shrieking was the sound, and harder, glassier, more resonant, the road, with the wind whistling a defiant chorus about it all.

Now they turned out on the long diagonal — miles across the prairie yet, without a house in sight till they should reach the home lane leading down to the pasture gate. The direction was such that it threw Nannie much exposed to the north wind, and Bent thought, as he sat in her lee, that he ought to change sides with her; but he dreaded the

upraising of the robes, and the consequent exposure of her to the cold during the exchange, so he drove on silent and alert.

At last one of his feet felt numb, and no amount of stamping or toe wiggling seemed to help it. Then he thought of hers, and asked her about them, but she did not reply. He was sure she was asleep again, and he would let her sleep on. But finally he was so chilled himself, that he reached down to Nannie's muff, and pulled one of her hands out, and it was so icy that it frightened him.

He straightened up as if he had been pierced, and shook the shoulder near him gently, but she only moaned. He called her, and she simply seemed to breathe a long sigh at him for reply. Then he became frightened indeed, and shook her fiercely with both hands—so that she roused a little, murmured something and relapsed again.

He leant forward and secured his lines to the dashboard, and pulled his mittens off—the pretty mitts which, after the episode of the turkey's nest, she had knitted for him, and tufted in many colors and pretty pattern of flowers with her own deft fingers, now so cold! He

pulled her hands out of the muff, rubbed them hard, and put them into the great gloves. He tore the veil away and rubbed her face roughly, and began to tremble a little, and his breath came quaveringly in a sort of half sob.

“Nannie! Nannie!! Nannie!!!”

He put a hand on each side of her face and kneaded her cheeks, and rolled her pretty countenance in his great palms, distorting it, as one may caress a child.

“Nannie! Wake up, Nannie!”

He felt her hands again. They were a little warmer, he believed. He thought of her feet, and slipped the mittens over these,—first blowing his warm breath into them. Likewise he warmed the muff and put her hands back into it. Again he shook her—took her into his arms, hugged her face up against his shoulder, and whimpered as a boy—not daring to lay his icy cheek on hers, though he longed to so much!

He laid her back and covered her, and reaching forward took the whip and lashed the team into a run, and prayed.

Lord, Lord! should it come to this—he sitting there helpless beside her while she froze?

He was desperate, and thought of desperate things. It would not do just to wrap her up so and let her sleep. What could he do to rouse her?

It flashed on him that if he could awake her just a bit and then make her angry, that he might save her thus. He had seen her "hot" when mad at him — a little. He got outside the robes and knelt before her. "Nannie! Don't be a goose. Wake up! Wake up!" And he shook her by both shoulders rudely back and forth as he would shake a foe, till she moaned and mumbled something about letting her rest. But he could not rouse her further. The sleigh was rocking fearfully. What should he do? And then — God help him! (he prayed again) — he took his open palms and slapped her face — the tears rolling down his own and freezing upon the hairy robe — slapped her till she cried out, and then bent over her and cried also himself and soothed her as if she were a babe. Then he pushed her from him and slapped her again, and she came up a little stronger, and stretched a bit. He set her up, her back unsupported, and shook her, and, as she drowsed down again, he slapped her with alternate hands, fast and furi-

ous, and, oh, thank Heaven ! she spoke angrily at him and thrust out her lip in a futile pout ; but her eyes soon closed as her neck became limp again. Then he caught her and shook her still, till she looked at him, and he let her see him slap her purposely ; and when she glared at him he thrust his fist into her face menacingly, and commanded her harshly to wake up.

She roused more fully now, and he took her hands and beat them hard into his palms, and she moaned and said he hurt her. He retorted mockingly that he did not care, he was trying to hurt her ; and he smote her cheeks with her own hands. At last she snatched one loose, and tried to strike back at him. He laughed — happily to himself, but sneeringly to her — and she struck — oh, so impotently ! — again, but was wider awake still, and asked him who he was that insulted her.

He had now to attend to the flying team, for the road was rougher ; but he taunted her as he guided them and got them down to a slower gait, then he turned again to further anger her. Finally he took the robes and rudely rolled her into a bundle, tucking them about her feet and

head; and with sheer force, he laid her, resisting and protesting, on the sleigh bottom — her feet back under the seat. Then he climbed out, and ran behind the sleigh awhile — stepping around on the runners to keep her well rolled up, and shaking her occasionally.

At last he reached the pasture gate, and went up the drive, hearing a tree pop in the frost. He tied the team hurriedly, and took the bundle in his arms, still struggling and protesting, and laid it before the smouldering back-log in “mother’s room” — the old room at her home.

From a little shed-room he roused the parents, and the father sprang in, the mother following a little later.

“Unwrap her,” said Bent, now nearly exhausted himself. “She’s been asleep — asleep from cold, and — and — I had to rouse her and wrap her up so.”

“I wasn’t asleep,” said the girl. “I was resting, oh, so sweetly! and he struck me — this man struck me! Who is he, mother?”

Mrs. Ditmer saw the whole situation in a flash. “Why, that is Bent, darling.”

“It is *not* Bent, for Bent would not have struck me. I’ll tell Bent, all about it — all

about it — about it — 'out it — 't uh — " And she dozed off.

The parents were frightened indeed now, and began to rub her, and she roused, but moaned dreamily: "He struck me, struck me!" and poor Bent's conscience smote him at these wails.

Suddenly behind him there was the click of the hall door-latch, and a half-clad figure stood there, wild-eyed, glaring, furious.

"What does this mean, Bent Hickman? My sister says you struck her!"

"I did often, because —"

The figure had reached for his gun, still in the corner near him, but, as he raised it from the floor, he found himself pinioned against the wall by the wrists — the weapon flat against the surface, and pointing upward.

"Hear me," said Hickman, "and if I have done wrong, then —"

There was a struggle, but the great grip was very quieting.

"I *did* strike your sister, but —"

Again a scuffle, and the gun was shoved a little upward, before it could be stopped, and the hammer scraped upon a nail on the rough

surface, and there was an explosion, a spreading blotch upon the plaster near them, and a splintered hole in the floor above.

The mother screamed, the father shouted, and the sounds all aroused the girl to herself again. She sprang to her knees—her flesh yet numb—and spread her hands toward the strugglers, as if she prayed, and the same sweet word, “Brother!” left the foolish fellow limp in his opponent’s grasp, and the tenderly up-toned monosyllable, “Bent!” loosened that.

“Why are you fighting?”

“Can’t you tell us?” said Dick, coming forward.

“No, for you love me, and Bent loves me—and—and is so good to me, and you should love each other so.”

She stared around the room, half dazed. “Why, we are at home, Bent! and—and—I left you at the Brinker gate—no, you were untying the horses—and—let’s see—my feet got cold—and—” her mind seemed to try to run a long circle, but failed—“they are numb yet. Did I come on, Bent, and leave you?”

And then Bent told them all except about his prayers and tears; and Dick sank on the floor,

and blubbered like a boy, and begged for pardon. Then the girl, still on her knees, stretched her hands toward her sweetheart, and, working her finger-tips graspingly, as a child reaches for light or love, she said, as he approached her, "Oh, Bent, Bent, Bent! In saving *me*, how nearly did I come to losing *you*!"

"I think I shall go on home now," said Bent, some time later.

"Well, not if this court knows itself," said Dick. "You go up to bed." And he did, and Dick went out and rubbed that team down and fed it, and came back and sat beside his sister, hearing the house pop as the cold lifted here or there some portion of the foundation higher than the rest.

When the dawn came, he looked out and saw a chicken fall dead from its perch in the trees; saw the smoke curl from George's cabin as if it were thick and one might cut it; saw the great bulge in the water-barrel burst upward as a blossoming bud: and the spirit was all gone out of him, and he thanked God that his sister was safe, his friend alive, and no blood on his own rash hands.

XIX

"Is she that kind of a girl? . . . I love her because she loves you, Bent."

NANNIE, after all, had not been seriously frozen, and a few days hence found her at school again.

Now the winter sun, northing noticeably week by week, shone vernal in its sheen upon the ice even; and the days, in light and bird-song and balmy feel upon the face, began to hint of spring. It might be winter yet, at times, but it was not the autumn winter. There was hopefulness in the outlook, even though it stormed or threatened.

The girl looked out one day, and saw the first shimmer of the February light upon the bluebird's wing; and she thought more and more of the old folks and the old scenes at home, and of Bent; because she had never seen this first sign of the rousing year anywhere before except amid the old scenes. Her homesickness became so persistent that she

wrote Dick a note, and asked him to take her out soon.

The following Saturday and Sunday she spent with her folk — the dead bare earth seeming fair with associations.

But Bent did not come, because his mother was very ill, and he would not leave her. He and the two old servants, Mima and Uncle Dan, had been taking turns in sitting by her day and night, with the help of occasional neighbors. It was Sunday afternoon. The mother turned to him, as he went quietly about the room, and said : —

“Go, Bent, a little while. They tell me Nannie Ditmer is at home. I’m better now.”

“No, I can see Nannie other days, mother. I’ve lots of time to be with her, but —”

And he stopped, his voice choking, and he wished he had not said that.

“Poor boy — poor boy! Don’t cry; I’m better. I shall not go soon. Mima will sit with me a while, and some neighbor may come in. Go.”

“No, no. She’d hate me if I did, and — and — she ought to — if — if she knew.”

“Is she that kind of a girl, Bent?” her face

beaming. "You know I have not seen her much since she is grown. Would she love you better, because—because she knew you loved your mother so?"

"She's that kind of a girl," he said, "but she was not always so, mother. She's changed."

"God bless her! I love her because she loves you, Bent. That's enough for me."

The boy bowed his head as if upon it he would carry the blessing to his own, and his mother stretched a weak, thin hand and put it on his hair as she had so often done when he was a child.

"Sometime, Bent, when—when I am stronger, I want you to bring her to me. She's the woman I shall turn you over to, you know."

He sobbed so that she was silent for a while.

"If I never see her, Bent, I'll leave some message for her—with you."

She lay a long time silent—very weak.

"Bent," she said, rousing later, "if you marry her, I would not mind her creed. If you want to, why—you go with her. Oh, creeds are such trifling things when you lie here,—when you lie here, Bent, as I am now,—such trifling things! I wonder we have time for them in life."

He feared she was talking too much, and told her so. She rested a long while, and the day, clearing at the close for a bright to-morrow, let in the western sun in its long slant from over the Flint Creek woods. The boy looked out that way and sighed. She knew what was in his mind.

"Bent?"

"Yes, mother."

"She may not get to me in time."

"Oh, yes, mother, you're going to get stronger, now that spring is coming."

"She may not get to me in time, and you can write her. Some day, Bent, I'll tell you something to write — for — for fear I may not see her — and — and you might forget."

And she went off to sleep a little, while from his bowed head the tears rolled and rolled beside her bed and splashed upon the floor.

Day by day after that, for weeks, he went about the farm, he and his help, shovelling corn into the troughs to feed the fattening herds, or hauling hay and cornstalk fodder "to rough the other stock through." At night the three took turns beside the bed, resting each other's weariness.

In the chill east winds and murky gasps of the surly winter's death he could see her weakening slowly but surely from his life ; and his prospective loss lay heavy on him, so that his broad young shoulders stooped beneath his load of woe.

One morning before dawn, the sufferer moaned, turned — waked and sighed weakly.

“Is that you, Bent?”

“Yes, mother, can I —”

“You must go after her to-day ; I want to see her.”

“Yes, mother.”

“And Bent, here a moment — if she should not get here before — before — tell her — write this, boy — tell her some day when it suits you, that I bore you — but that sometime — somewhere — you'll come again into life — another good woman — her, I hope — bearing the travail of your second birth — that you will come crying to your second self ; and — be sure to write this, Bent — that as you've been worth it all to me — you'll be worth it all and more to her some day — some day. Remember, boy, that you need not tell her this — if I can see her long before I go — but write it for fear that I may not, and that you may forget.”

And he arose and wrote it on the fly-leaf of her Bible at her hand.

“After dinner, Bent, will you go for her? — yes, *you* must go. I wish it *so*.”

When he came in to bid her good-by, she pulled him to her, and said, “Remember, boy, many a man is twice born, and you may owe the woman that you wed as much as you do your mother.”

XX

"She backed away defiantly . . . slammed the door and ran."

BENT drove to town — wondering how Nannie would take this. His heart was very sore and in every way distressed. He thought it best to hunt up Dick and let him go up to Nannie, but the lawyer was out of town — up the railroad somewhere, they said, and the farmer did not dare to wait. He therefore went up to the college himself, saw the president, and explained. This man knew of the young stockman by reputation, but questioned him rather closely, and then consented that Nannie should go. Bent had not expected to have to undergo this ordeal, and he was keenly sensitive to his situation. He was not dressed for it. He was so pushed for time that he had on his working clothes, his trousers tucked into his boots.

Nannie was feeling gloomy and disappointed, for Bent had not sent her word why he had failed

to come to see her when she was out at home. Neither had she heard of his mother's serious illness, though she knew that she had long been an invalid.

"Nan Ditmer, there's a fellow in the parlor that wants to see you. The president says for you to come down. He's kind o' country-like — pants in his boot-tops and all that," said Lil Leighton. "Come and see him. He seems to need some one to lead him around."

Nannie arose with much misgiving. As she passed down the hall, several girls tittered, and some teased her good-humoredly, while others threw out taunts that were not kind. She was nearly ready to cry when she burst into the parlor and found Bent standing by the mantel, his face away from her. Before he could turn she knew him, and broke out very petulantly:—

"Oh, Bent, why *did* you come?"

The cry cut, but it could not instantly crush out the softness from his sorrow that was in his face. As he turned it to her, she thought the distress she saw there was the result of her rebuke, and, in her indignation, she enjoyed it. He stood stunned, so that he did not speak.

"Are my folks well?" she asked snappishly.

"Yes, all well," he said, "but —"

"Then why *did* you come? I do not want to see you here. I —"

"I think I do not know *now why* I came," he said, so soberly that, if she had been sane, it would have scared her. "I wish I had not come."

"I'm sure *I* do. What did you tell the president?"

"I told him that you had been sent for."

"By whom, please?"

"By my mother. She is —"

"Did you tell him that?"

Oh, why could she not, why did she not, heed the dying thing that was gasping in his face!

"Yes" (very, very coolly).

"What did he say?" her eyes flashing.

"He asked me why — what relation I was to you, and —"

"You told him?"

"Yes."

"What else?"

"That I wanted to take you to my mother, as she —"

"Then I'll not go;" and backing away

from him defiantly, and, watching a moment as she went the changing lines in his face, she slammed the door and ran.

He stood there — silent, smitten, stolid, his heart hardening upward till his throat swelled as taut as the tendon's of his clenched fist. His breath wheezed and whistled in his glottis, and his face purpled into onyx. He stood there till his eyes set in a stare of hate and his teeth ground in a sort of scream. There came a moment when he felt his chest constricted, as if a great serpent were wrapped about it, and for an instant his breath left him, and he heard his pulse beating in his head. Then his lungs collapsed in a long shuddering expiration, and his heel lifted from the hearth and smote the bricks for seconds in a tattooing tremor. Still he stood there — unable to rouse himself.

Later the president, passing, peeped in and saw him standing; thinking that Miss Ditmer had not come down yet, he went, himself, to call her. At this intrusion the young man awoke from his blow and walked out coolly and climbed into his buggy.

When the president knocked no one in Nannie's room responded, and he opened the door

cautiously and looked in. The girl was sitting quiet in her indignation, her face still hardened as he spoke to her.

"Mr. Hickman is in the parlor and wants to see you."

"I saw him."

"You can go with him if you wish."

"I don't wish."

"I'm sure it is all right. I believe he is your — your — friend."

"I'm not going, and I told him so."

"Did he tell you why he came — that his mother was dying and wished to see you before —"

She sprang to her feet, blanched as her kerchief. "No! — no — he did not tell me that! He may have, but I did not hear him."

"I think you had better go, my dear. He is in great distress."

And the kind-hearted man, whom the boys all made a great bear of, closed the door gently and stole away.

"Oh, what a fool! What a fool!" she said again. "What have I done — what have I done?"

She stepped to the mirror a moment to see

her cruel face, before she sprang for the stairway, and there was a jerking, bobbing buggy-top, a road far distant, narrowing, and a curve, hiding — hiding — hiding it. She snatched her window up and gazed out and back and down the lane. Nothing — nothing to be seen !

XXI

“She gazed to see . . . if, as this spirit rose, his dead love had risen with it.”

WHEN she knew herself again she was limp across the window-sill, hanging outward far ; and she hung there for a moment half-way resolved to struggle farther and fall out ; but she arose finally and pulled the window down. For a while her pillow trembled. What could she do ? Dick was away — up the road — she knew that — what could she do but sob ? Poor Bent ! — poor boy — his mother dying ! She had not thought of that. Why, Mrs. Hickman was better when she heard from her last — but — now “dying and wanting to see *me* ! Lord ! how can I bear it ?” She arose to lock her door, but it flew open, and a flock of girls was in her room with taunts in their faces.

“Oh, ho !” began Miss Leighton, but the girl was almost upon her at a bound.

“Not a word ! He’s all to me that you think,

and ten times more than you can imagine. I know why you've come. You think because he's roughly dressed that he is rude and boorish, and that you'll make sport of him. I'd strike you before you should do that. He came here to-day to take me to his mother, and, God help me! I did not go. Do you know why, Lil Leighton? Do you know that a woman out on that prairie there is dying and wants to see me before she dies, and that I did not go with him because I feared your teasing? I hate you; but I hate myself more than I do you. I have lived in his love all my life and seen the pure gold of him tested, and yet for fear of your sneer —" She stopped a moment, as if her remorse overcame her, then: "You're turning your eyes at my brother. He's water to Bent Hickman, and he'll tell you so. Ask him, if you dare, and sneer in his presence at his sister's lover, and —"

But they were gone, skulking silently down the hall.

The coming of the girls had roused her.

With their going came the impulse to get up and walk out to Bent's home, but she was not strong enough for that. However, she knew not why, she arose and dressed herself as

if she were going to walk. She dropped a moment by the window, in sheer desperation, and looked out at the old scene so often soothing; but it failed her now because her heart was strained beyond it over that great prairie stretch, to that lonesome buggy bobbing in the lane and that sad home beyond.

As she gazed she saw a film of vapor shoot above the fringe of trees, and now it trailed against the yellow cut! She sprang to her feet strong and determined. She knew that Dick would reach the office about the time that she could walk to it, and she left a note for the president, and hurried out.

Anon out over the prairie road a team of horses speeds with eager strides, their nostrils wide, their ears set back in protest at their urging, their manes waving in the wind, their skins welted with the whip-lash mark. Behind them, a buggy rocks, fences stream, and farms fade; before them, swells arise, high vistas spread, long slanting descents shelve into jolting ruts and cross-ditches, while the earth runs backward under the whirling tires, and bits of black soil fly off at tangents, starring the murky

air. Far onward a spire is climbing the western sky, and the ridgeboard of a long roof lies on the horizon's rim.

"Oh, Dick! Dick! Dick!" said a choking voice.

"We'll get there, Nannie—in time."

"But *when* we get there, Dick!"

"We will hope," he said cheeringly.

"Brother, you can help me now. To-day I am your sister, doubly. You missed him when you fired, Dick, and did not mean it any way, or meant it well—but—my selfish blow went home—and—O God! I saw it hit. Now I know that I saw his love die at a gasp—but I did not know it then. *Now* I know that to me he lies a corpse, unless— Drive, Dick, drive!"

Some gothic points bobbed and floated on the brown crest of the sinking ridge—shot higher, and receded.

"Is that Prairie View church there, Dick? Oh, I remember her, I remember her—her sweet, motherly ways to me there that day—so kind, and proud of her reforming boy—and I spurned it all. Did I ever tell you about that, Dick? I'll tell you all some day. It will do me good—and—Dick, promise me that

you will despise me. I should not love you, brother, if you do not hate me then. You cannot respect yourself, if you do not."

"Hush, hush! Be quiet, we will soon be there."

They turned the corner at Prairie View now, and went due north along the lane.

"And, Dick, he was so gentle all that day, and I scorned his love there upon the stiles, and suffered — suffered for it, as I should, and I made amends as best I could; but now, to think that to-day — Drive, Dick, drive! I've just one hope."

Finally, they reached the house, and as he led her in, she reeled against him.

"Dick, take charge of me, I am so weak and faint. Do you suppose she knows? Do you reckon, Dick, that he has told her all — if — if — she is alive? My God, how can I look her in the face — no matter what — Say, brother, *you* tell Bent — tell him *all*. Please don't spare me. Won't you?"

Some one opened the door to them and drew them in, in that solemn way — so awful to an expectant heart — so presaging. Almost dragging on Dick's arm she came to the bedside, and

the girl stopped a little distance away, and braced herself inwardly, for what, she knew not. He might rise and curse her, as she thought he ought, and the dying woman might turn away her face. Some one said mechanically : —

“Here’s Nannie Ditmer.”

The boy’s head rose a little from the bed where it was buried, but it did not turn, and in an instant it was down again, tremulous with sobs. But the sufferer’s thin hand slid out a little way, her pale face turned expectant slightly, and the failing eyes moved faintly — searching. The girl put her own hot hand into the other cold one on the cover’s edge, and it was pushed — down — down, inch by inch, till it touched the brown hair upon the counterpane, and then a faint smile shone, and a whisper sounded, as if a babe was breathing at a light.

The girl fell on her knees. The young, throbbing hand crept onward, onward, a little, till the wrist lay about the boy’s neck, and a fair face lay beside the brown one, while both were sobbing in the drapery. When they looked up some one had closed the eyes,

and the same sweet smile was fixed, as though a soul were crystallized in a blessing. And that boy stood up alone in this world, except for her who stood beside him. He turned and looked at the girl, and again at the pale face upon the pillow, then back at the girl once more, as she cowered and gazed greedily into his eyes to see if, as this spirit rose, his dead love had risen with it.

XXII

"I think I'd rather tell her that myself."

NANNIE stayed out for the funeral, of course; and when it was all over she persistently refused to go back to that school again. How she hated it! she said—everything but the president and some teachers. Persuasion would not move her.

Day by day she thought of poor, suffering Bent toiling away out there in his prairie loneliness. He had not come to see her yet; and she wondered if his mind, when calm, would not revolt further, and tear her thankless image from his heart. Dick came out to try again to persuade her to go back to school, but he saw quickly that she was not fit, for he feared that she was threatened with *melancholia* and nervous prostration. He had seen Bent a few times casually, and had told her that he was well.

"Oh, Dick! did you ever find out if she knew? I cannot ask him when he comes."

"I cannot, either, Nannie, and we need not. It does not matter now if she did. Any one could see that she loved you — the last thing that she did was to love you. Don't worry any more."

He went out where his mother was and talked to her about his sister.

"She's in a bad fix, mother. I'm afraid the doctor ought to see her."

"Oh, it's nuthin'. She's sad, of course. If Bent would only come, she'd be better. He *will* come soon, I think — soon as *he* thinks it's proper after his mother's death, poor fellow! That's what's keepin' him."

And Dick went back to town.

But his father came in one day about a week later, and said Nannie was not well yet, and "seemed to pine," and he wished Dick would come out again soon. In a few days the brother drove out, and was scared to find his sister's face so gaunt, and that she had an indifferent and rather pouting air about her. Bent had not yet come.

Dick believed that she feared that he would never come; and when he asked her about it, she burst out crying and ran away from him as if he had been rude to her.

This roused the brother, and he rode by Bent's home on the way to town. He found the young farmer sturdily trimming a hedge. The high March wind was blowing a terrible sweep over the stalk-field near, whirling high the fodder blades and jarring the clasping leaf-sheaths till they sang here and there a weird melody — a sort of wail, as if the winter's ghost were passing. Bent was bowed under the spell of the elements as he had never been before, and Dick saw that his face, too, was haggard. He smiled cheerfully, however, as Dick came down a turn-row between the stalks, and he spoke a greeting, but, being on the other side of the hedge, he did not approach the buggy.

“How's all at home, Dick?”

“Nannie isn't very well, Bent.”

“What's the matter?”

“Well, so far as I can see, she isn't happy. Something's weighing on her mind. She doesn't say so, Bent, and she would not like it if she knew I told you, but I think she would like to see you — and — I came by about that, you know.”

The hedge-tips fell thick and fast, the corn-knife singing metallically at each stroke.

"I think for *her* good that she ought to see you — soon. I do so wish, Bent, that you would go over. We know it's — it's early after your — your affliction, but you're in the family there, you know, and it doesn't matter."

He waited a moment, but no reply.

"When can you go?"

"I don't know."

Dick's breath stopped an instant at the coolness of this reply.

"I wish you could go *soon*, Bent," he said. "I fear she is going to be sick, and you would do her good."

"Unh hunh!"

"Bent! God knows I cannot blame you. She did not treat you right — but — she was not herself then even. She was teased and plagued, and worn out studying too hard — I know that now, Bent. I don't think she has been quite well since Christmas — that time — when she got too cold, you know. And then she did not think, and she did not mean it. Oh, if you had seen her tears and deep regret as we drove! If I had not come she was going to walk; and she saw the smoke of my train, and came to me, and we drove.

“‘Drive, Dick, drive!’ she said over and over, and I did not know that I *could* treat a team like that.”

The corn-knife stopped. A gloved hand, safe in buckskin, stretched into the tangle, and pulled a long thorny twig out, and the drover's teeth, with a sort of determined set, bit out the bud at the end, and his lips sputtered as they spat the bitter milky juice away. It was a queer thing to see this brother pleading a sister's love away out on this dreary wind-swept field, as the gray clouds rolled and the corn-shucks, tumbleweed, and tickle-top grasses massed themselves in fluffy drifts against the prickly hedge.

“When we passed the church, Bent, where she saw your mother last fall—the day you joined the church—she bemoaned her behavior then, and said your mother was so sweet and kind—and she said, ‘Some day I'll tell you about it Dick, and you must despise me,’ and then she would wail, ‘To-day! to-day! to think that I should do what I did to-day!’”

The worker got an axe, and cut a tall hedge-brush half in two, and pushed it down to close a breach or gap beside it. Then he got upon it

with both feet and bore it down, bending his knees in jerking stamps as it settled — his face and jaw set firmly.

“She hasn’t told me all yet,” the brother continued, “and I won’t despise her — for you did not, Bent, I know you did not. You forgave her in your great manly heart, as you forgave me, God bless you! when —”

The stockman looked up, his face a little softened, still standing on the hedge.

“Bent, come here, old fellow,” said Dick, his voice choking.

Hickman dropped his axe, stepped down on Dick’s side, and approached the buggy.

“What is it, Dick?” he said, as if he had wakened from a stupor. The lawyer reached a hand upon his shoulder.

“Why, her heart is breaking, Bent, not only about you — but, she cries and cries to know if your mother knew, before she died, that — that — Bent, she did not know your mother was so sick. She had heard that she was better.”

The other looked up at him, and the attorney held his eye.

“Why, she’s a baby, Bent — the same sweet

baby you and I have carried about, and have seen angry, and have laughed at, teased, and soothed; and she's a baby yet, because she is not well. You have *always* loved her, Bent—this baby—and she's loved you, and you could soothe her often when no other could. Do you remember the first time you ever got her to sleep? And once, when she was sick, do you recall how, in our bedroom, Bent, we turned our little bare heels up together as we knelt and prayed that God would not take her from us? And now, she wonders if your mother knew—and her heart is breaking at the thought. I believe she'd crawl to you, Bent, if you'd let her, she loves you so. You *will* go soon, won't you? I'd love the black soil you walk on if you would!"

"Yes, so soon as I can."

"And shall I go back and tell her that—you—forgive her, Bent?"

"No!" and the old boyish light shone in his eyes. "I—I think I'd rather tell her that myself."

And Dick drove, happy, on to town.

But that night Bent's partner, Smith, came, wild and excited. The market was up and

climbing, and they must ship. He had ordered cars. They would be there by morning.

“Drive your cattle in to-morrow, early. I’ll bring mine, and come by for those that Sweetser is feeding for us. *I’ll* go to the city with them.”

So the morrow saw the young drover, pony, and dog winding slowly the lanes and paths into town. That afternoon, while loading, Smith slipped and sprained his ankle badly, and Bent had to go off to the metropolis on the train.

Again his herds and material things came in between him and his duty of love. Would it ever come again? and would it stay then, if it came?

XXIII

"Bent, did she ever know?"

Day by day the girl grew more morose—speaking fretfully to her father, even, and driving her mother from her room.

One day her cheeks flushed hot, and to the casual eye a fever was evident. Depressive and elated spells, explosive bits of hysteria, and illusions cropped out here and there, till the family doctor was called, and compelled her to go to bed.

"Drive, Dick, drive!" she often exclaimed. . . . Is that Prairie View out there? . . . Some day I'll tell you, Dick, and you *must* despise me."

At times, when they roused her to give her medicine, she would say, wonderingly, "And now we are at home, ar'n't we, Bent? and—and—did I leave you at Brinker's gate? Let's see, where did I leave you? Where did I leave you—leave you—'ve you—you?"

and she would sleep again an hour or so, and rouse with a scream, her eyes staring at a spot upon the wall.

"Mother, take away that buggy top—away—away—away!—it mocks me with its nodding. O God! it's gone—gone—gone and I'm not in it!"

The doctor came and went with solemn mien, the fever burned, the fair form tossed and moaned day by day. At times she rose up strong, and said that she must go to him, and they had to hold her in the bed till she was quiet.

The neighbors came, of course, and sat around with crude kindness, not knowing what to do, or rather, what not to do, and they hummed mysteriously long conversations in the corner.

The mother sent Dick word, and he came, and dismissed many of these, as kindly as he could, but got their eternal enmity notwithstanding. He asked others who had some nursing sense to stay by her with her mother.

"Gossip, lean and hungry," grew bloated on her delirium, and speculation soared on uncertain wing about it; for of course Dick held his tongue.

One day, as he sat by her, she seemed to know him for the first time, and his hopes bounded for a moment but—then:—

“Dick, are we nearly there?”

“Yes, sister,” humoring her whim.

“And you *will* despise me, *won't* you, Dick—won't you?”

“Yes, yes—be quiet now.”

“Oh, Dick, I do love so much to have you hate me.”

Then a little slumber, and he sat constrained so long as he could, but at a slight movement she woke into a wild stare.

“Dick, did she ever know?”

“I'm sure she did not, darling.”

“Yes, I told her, Dick, I saw her. It was last year, and I told her”—and her face lighted beautifully. “Yes, I told her, and she smiled—smiled at me, Dick—but when—when she stretched her hand for the head upon the coverlet—no—head was there” (a wild shriek). “O God! it was *a skull—a skull!*”

Then she sobbed almost screamingly, and he took her into his arms and soothed her down to sleep again.

The doctor came soon after this and gave

her some potion, under the influence of which she slept.

One afternoon Dick rode out to Bent's place, and found him just returned, as he expected.

There was no surplus verbiage now. The lawyer said, so firmly that he scared the drover:—

“It is time to come now. If you do not, your delay will damn you.”

“I'll come.”

“You will *go with me*. Make ready your affairs to stay until you are needed, or can be spared. Promise that I may use you as I wish—to save her mind and body. You do not know—you do not realize. As you loved your mother, I love my sister. Promise me.”

“You may use me as you will, and I will help you,” the other said resignedly.

And then the brother broke into sobs, and threw his arms about his friend, and said:—

“Bent, you talk as if you were your old self again, God bless you! and we *will* save her yet—together we will save her—yours and mine. Can you pray a little yet, Bent? God help me! I've forgotten words of prayer, though my heart

is right. Can't you shape a little prayer? Let's go in here where your mother d — smiled — here, Bent — come — kneel beside me — as we have done before."

And Dick pulled the stalwart form down by him, and slipt a hand around his neck, and listened:—

"O God, sometimes we are struck and lie sorrowing at Thy feet, and in our suffering beg for mercy. Sometimes we go proudly on, forgetting we are frail, till we feel Thy hand upon us. To-day, we two, burdened with the same grief, bow here—in—in this sacred place and ask—and ask that one dear to one—[a breathless silence] *to both of us!* may live and be strong and happy in all that this life shall give. Lord, help us to know Thy blessings in the sweet lives that are about us daily before—before—they—"

And the voice broke with sobs, till Dick arose and said, "Come!"

Bent's experience with his mother made him a tender nurse, and, in her better moods, he sat with Nannie sometimes—alone—though she did not know him. It had been cutting his

heart to hear her wail over her treatment of him and her misfortunes; and if resentment had tarried with him for a while, it was all gone now at her distress. His great love was towering high again.

One day she knew him, and gazed at him long—as if to make him out and to determine why he was there.

“Bent, I left you, didn’t I—at Brinker’s gate, and you froze—froze? and I struck you, didn’t I?”

“No, little one, don’t talk now. Go to sleep.”

“But I must say my prayers before I sleep, Bent.”

“Well?”

“‘Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If—if—if—’ What is the other, Bent?”

“‘If I should die—’” he said, prompting.

“Why, if I should die, I should see her, and maybe—I could tell her, couldn’t I, Bent?”

“Yes,” humoringly. “Go to sleep now.” And she dozed off at his command, as if he had hypnotized her, as, indeed, in her weak mental state, he had, unconsciously.

It was pitiable to see her mind in her nervous

prostration go back to her babyhood, as it did, but it was sweet to him to hear her prattle as a child—sweet, with the great dread that she might never be sane and grown again.

She awoke later, with him still there by her, silent, solemn, watching.

“Bent, when I last saw your face—let’s see, where did I last see your face—yes—yes—you were standing by the mantel—and I left you—no—no—you left me. I saw your buggy in the glass—”

Then a great shriek of fear came, and she hid her face within her pillow, and he put his own cheek down by her hot, fever-scented one, and she began to sob as she felt it there. Shortly she put up her arms, and said quietly, “It was very kind of you, Bent, to come for me, I’m glad you are here, I’ll go with you directly.”

And at the word “Sleep!” from him she was gone again.

Later Dick came in and found them quiet; but soon she arose in a climax of her delirium. She sprang up on the edge of the bed before Dick could resist her, and almost screamed in angry tones, “For your sneer, Lil Leighton,

I left him, and let a woman die; and I could curse you, and crawl to him!"

Then Bent broke down and sobbed in his hands, as if his heart were breaking. When Dick got her to lie down again, she smiled peacefully, and said:—

"Ah, that's the steam of the train there over the woods!" Then, dramatically:—

"Drive, Dick, drive!"

And she sank back exhausted.

The doctor stayed with her that night, and drove Bent off to bed for his own good, that there might not be another patient. The girl lay stupid now—the delirium gone, the fever lowering every function—leaving open every gap wide as it fled. The doctor sat by, hour by hour, and to Dick, who watched around, the sturdy face of the physician never seemed to change. Now and then there was the clink of the spoon against the glass, a moist, cool cloth swept kindly over the scorched lips, and a rough hand slipped tenderly under the cover to the chilling feet.

Another watch long and anxious!

Then those who glided softly around her saw

no movement of her breast — heard no moan — no sigh even — could perceive no life — just the blank absence of death. The doctor took his fingers from the wrist which dropped so limply, and whispered, and the room began to fill, and the odor of mustard and camphor, and all the sickening, suggesting things rose rank. Anxious hands rubbed hard her feet and legs, her hands and arms; and heaving bosoms were nearly breathless, except in tremulous subdued sobs of distress and prayer.

Bent heard the creak and soft, frequent tread of the motion below, and came down; and the sight of the white face scared him as no other ever had. In his mother's case he had *expected* death; it came on gradually. But here — why, he left her flushed and rosy when he went to bed!

He could do nothing for her. There were hands there more deft than his, and better suited to the work, so he crept around near Dick, and they crowded together under the powder-blotch upon the wall, and — each knew what the other was doing now.

Away on later, when the chickens crowed and the ducks began to talk a little, the old

doctor leaned back with a sigh of rest, his hand upon his tired loins, and felt her pulse again, and laid his ear upon her chest, and rose and stretched himself from his weary bending. Walking over to Bent, he said, —

“I should not let her see me again, if I were you—till she begins to get strong—quite strong.”

“*Get strong—quite strong!*” Thank God! The boys could have hugged him there.

Daily Bent rode over, as she strengthened, and later they began to tell her when he had come; but that the doctor thought that it was better that she should not see him yet; in a little while, they said, when she was stronger still, she should have him with her. And she waited patiently, and grew better yet.

At last they all thought that she might see him soon. There was no hint of fever now—her nervousness was gone, and surrounded by robes, she could sit up for quite a while, in the large rocker before the fire. Bent came over one morning when Dick had gone for him; and, though she was not to see him till the afternoon, she heard his step and voice

in the hall. Once she heard him and Dick talking in the room above—heard Dick say firmly:—

“No, Bent, I’ll never patch it. I need it always as a reminder.” Then she heard Bent plead to blot it out and forget it all.

“No! no, not for worlds!” her brother said.

Later she saw him out the window, on the lawn, walking with Dick—as if to kill time. But it was purposely planned to ease the shock of meeting.

At last the brother, apprehensive yet, took Bent in; and as she lay back quite calmly in the rocker, she said:—

“How are you, Bent?”

He took her pale hand, and, kissing her forehead, said that he was always well. How was she?

To Dick it was surprising that she should be so cool. He backed out—clicking the door-latch strongly—and left Bent still holding to her hand.

When she knew that the door was closed, the wild stare sprang into her eyes again.

“Bent—*did she ever know?*”

“No,” he said quickly, thanking God in his

heart that he could so speak the truth; for he feared he would have lied and gloried in it. "No; I told her that you could not come then, but maybe you would—later—if—you could."

She pulled him down to her, the wild glare gone now—gone forever,—and he dropped his face into the robe upon the rocker's arm. Then the same thin hand glided beyond his neck and curled over his cheek, as she tried to draw him to her.

"Bent, you're mine—all mine now—mine from her you know,—and if you'll forgive me,—why—from this on—I'll love you so—I'll *treat* you so—that—that—the angels will never tell her!"

And he felt her kisses on his head and knew that her tears of penitence were falling on his hair.

XXIV

“And she was gone!”

THE girl was happy now, as day by day she felt life surging back and the hopeful outlook widening into deeper joys. She was in that delightful realm of convalescence, where, if weakness asks for help it does not beg, but simply borrows with solvency in sight; where love puts pity kindly out the door, and labor thrusts not in its weary face; where duty does not intrude, but awaits a becoming season; where hope bounds high, and gratitude beats time to every strengthening step.

She could walk to the window to-day. To-morrow she would journey into the parlor and see how new the old things were in there. The next day, if it was fair, she might walk the porch; and the next, which would be Saturday, perhaps she could stand out upon the stiles and welcome some one as he came riding up.

At last she was well — well as ever — and

better ; for the reviving wave of health had overflowed — surged beyond — its usual bounds ; and she was in beauty and vivacity more than her former self. Her moroseness was gone also with the ashes of her past — burned out by that raging fever in her blood.

Out of doors, sometimes by herself among the birds and flowers of the spring and summer, often romping with her lover or her brother in her renewed strength, she stayed much. With her new vigor she was older — maturer — than the added year should show in ordinary sequence, and this last twelvemonth of her teens saw her mind bound with her ripening body — even faster. With it all grew a new grain of consistency into her soul, born of her suffering. The months in town had come to her mind just as it spread its wings, and she was broadened mentally, her outlook deepened, and her vision strengthened for the greater depths. The president and her teachers were of another denomination than her own, but she had loved them, and was convinced that they were Christians of the highest stamp. There were things which creeds alone did not build.

She had acquired a taste for books beyond

that which had been her wont; and her brother, pleased at it, had fostered it with volumes bought, hired, or borrowed for her. So she read much, and told to Bent, with a second pleasure, the outlines of all which she absorbed.

His fibre was not so fine as hers, but his mental grasp was intuitively great; and while the subtler things sometimes escaped him, she saw that deeds—great deeds—thrilled him, and his broad chest would widen and his nostrils spread, as she read to him of oppression or brave resistance or loving sacrifice.

One day when she was reading of a man who had been roused to all he was and should be by contact with better friends, till he did great things himself, he said, as if he felt that he had lost so much:—

“I wish I could have lived that book.”

“You may live a better one—and I—I—think you have.”

“Then I’d like to live a second volume.”

“And you may live that too,” she replied.

“You are scarcely born yet—”

He started.

“Where did you get that?” he said rousingly.

"Out of my life, I reckon. I have lived half of it in the last six months, I think."

As he rode home, his head hung in thinking — thinking how she was growing away from him — how womanlike she was, and wondering what he could do to keep pace with her. It was not his to hamper her in every way, he thought. Dick had said that she should go to school again where advantages were better, especially in art, and Bent bowed his head and stilled his heart and consented.

The summer sun ran lower to the south, and a sort of sweet sombreness stole over the deep perspective, till the autumn hum of insects, singing recklessly now for love and life, whirled in the seared grass, and the ebb of gold was beached along the lanes by the surge of drab which seemed to well up from the earth. Here and there the rust crept upon the iron sinews of the valiant year in brown and blush among the trees and brambles; the haze sat upon the woods anew, as if some slumber-spirit breathed upon the buds and bade them sleep.

And she was gone!

Daily Bent toiled alone and lonesome out on the prairie farm, or rode wider and wider and

invested deeper and deeper for somebody's sake. Many a night he tossed sleepless for her who had cheered him in his daily work — now gone forever — and for the other whose sweet face weekly nearly all his life had been his inspiration and delight. He would be ready for this latter when she came again.

XXV

“Why, Nan Ditmer — of course you’ll see him.”

IN the old town where Nannie went, there was a school for boys also, or for young men rather; and at times the female college held socials, at which the students were always found.

Among these, the girl was rather popular, as any pretty girl is apt to be, and in time she found good friends, who knew her worth.

Many a weary-headed fellow liked to drop beside her for a while and feel the evident sincerity of her interest; and some braced themselves for better work, because, in a certain way, she seemed to presume so much and expect the best things of them.

She enjoyed these student friends. To her they were a revelation and a wonder; and her interest in them was more selfish than it appeared. They never shone in the light of wooers or mere gallants even; they were just comrades, scarcely of the other sex — simply friends,

helpers, helped. Her heart was already full of overflowing love, and she therefore threw out none of those little explosive attractions, of which the want-to-be-courted woman is a flying battery.

The more refined of the boys opened the world to her as nothing else had ever done; but she was content to peep into it, not to enter. She had lived in nature and its sincerity. She revelled in the ideal, it is true, but it was the ideal of simplicity—not of artificiality.

To the rural students, she was even almost sisterly. She felt now that she would not be ashamed of Bent if he were here, for there were many like him in one way—not half so great in others, she was sure. These she found were put forth in prominent places upon programmes, and they were taking firm grips upon prizes in prospect at the session's close.

Once, when one of these distinguished himself in debate, demolished with heavy blows his cultured opponent's arguments, and, in spite of his awkwardness and evident embarrassment, wrung applause from the fastidious audience before him, Nannie could have almost shouted, for this was Hoyle; and she

thought of Bent and his towering force at times when she heard him speak. Then her heart grew heavy that he could not come and learn and tower.

Often, when out before an audience, in husky voice and with trembling knee, many an awkward speaker had sought her face, in the nearer seats of the bank of college beauties, and had looked into her earnest eyes for encouragement, and found inspiration.

A few of "the upper set" were condescending, or tried to be, when they met her, but they soon shied off as she sounded their shallows with ingenuous queries and punctured their self-complacency with a word. Others of all sorts became so confiding that she fought them off, and turned their minds into different channels. She was an "irregular senior," and her conduct was so orderly that the president told her she would be allowed to receive once every fortnight the attentions of any young man who should engage her company.

One afternoon an old colored man came up the avenue. Ever since he left the business region he had been watched; and the girls had seen, through the leafless limbs, the waving of

the white thing in his hand. So they were in her room waiting.

"Why, Nan Ditmer, yes — of course you will see him — how can you hesitate?" said a saucy-eyed, dark-haired junior. "Say, I'll write your note for you — your reply, may I? Oh, do let me — let me get that much out of it. Now, Nan? Do-oo-o!"

"Well — yes —" said Nannie.

Shortly, the girl read, "Miss Ditmer returns her compliments to Mr. De Lorne, and will see him, with pleasure, this evening."

"Cut out the 'with pleasure,' please."

"There is no need of that," said Kate Sunderland, Nannie's room-mate, just coming in.

"Well, *I* think there is."

"All right, Nell," said Kate, "you can leave it out — write another; but, let me tell you, Nan Ditmer, it expresses the truth — the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I know him and I know you; and if you see Ralph De Lorne this evening, you'll see him 'with pleasure' — mark my words. Will you confess when you come up?"

"Yes," said Nannie, "but confessing is different from prophesying."

XXVI

"But I saw the beacon on the hill."

THIS was Friday afternoon. The students' week of work was ended, and they strolled here and there, awaiting the train which brought the daily mail. Past a down-town barber shop two sauntered, and, looking in, they saw De Lorne, newly shaven, his hair sleek, his mustache curled and scented, walking, with his hands in his high-cut pockets, to and fro in impatient stride.

"Come, Ralph," they called to him, knocking on the glass; "if you must walk, come out with us. We are just walking."

"Can't. Am waiting for a note," motioning toward the college. "Come in and rest a fellow's patience."

And they came in.

"They say Miss *Ditmer* can receive now," said one, dropping in a chair beneath a mirror and tipping back.

"So I hear," said De Lorne, "but *will* she? — that's the question."

"Hello, here's Aubrey!" said one.

"What are all you fellows doing here?" said the latter, holding the door half open, as if hesitating. "Golly, I won't get shaved to-night."

"Your turn next," said the others. "De Lorne here is polished, out of your way, and waiting a college note. You know what that is — or did know, last year."

Aubrey had had a girl up there last year, and she had married a farmer since. He had been much teased about it.

"Devilish sorry for you, De Lorne," said Aubrey, as he climbed into a shaving chair at the cry of "next!" "These things cut both ways, no matter how they read. Say," he shouted, as he leaned back, "there's Hoyle. I want to see him. Knock on the glass, boys. I want to ask him about Monday's mathematics."

And at taps and beckons, a tall, well-knit, but awkward student crossed the street toward them.

"Fine old hayseed," said one. "You fellows seeking honors will have to watch Hoyle. He's in the game, you bet, according to himself and his name."

He came in, and they all enjoyed seeing the large-hearted fellow — so terrible in debate, and they punched at him with their affected wit. For these thrusts, he often paid back open-handed blows that were sometimes stunning.

“You know Miss Ditmer, don’t you, Hoyle?” said Aubrey. “Same county, I think?”

“Yes,” said Hoyle, “but,” with a sigh, “I fear preëmption there, boys.”

“The deuce you do!” said De Lorne, turning suddenly in his walk.

“Yes — yes — fellow a little like me, only handsome.”

“How do you know?” said De Lorne.

“I do not know — it’s an intuition — but I feel sure.”

“God help you, De Lorne,” said Aubrey, in mock despair. “If my experience can save you, take it along. I’m sorry that I cannot wrap it up for you, but it’s yours to profit by. The lass is interesting — to me, at least, who am a connoisseur in country girls — but — but I warn you if she likes Hoyle and his kind.”

“You say she is interesting. I don’t know about that,” said another. “She rather sees through a fellow too quickly, doesn’t she?”

Somehow I feel so dinged diaphanous to her, that I always want to apologize for something when she looks at me — something in me which I can't help."

"I'll tell you," said De Lorne, stopping his nervous walk and speaking seriously. "All jokes aside now. This is no place to speak a lady's name loud, but I wish to say that I like to have this girl meet me at my failings — I'll admit them — and camp there, and beside her tent I build a tabernacle and am strong. If she will tarry long I'll build a temple, and do worlds."

"But I want to do so much myself for the woman that I chöose," said one. "Every man should like the oaken idea of himself."

"The wooden-head!" said Aubrey beneath his breath and the barber's blade.

"There's not a vine to every tree," said Hoyle, "nor a tree to every vine. But to this woman, you may be sure, there is some one that is her trellis, and she climbs. Her affections are too reaching to stand erect alone, and they are too — too precious to be allowed to crawl."

"I'm a candidate for their support," said De Lorne.

He stepped to the door, chinked some change into the old darkey's hand, took the note—opened it—read—his face lighting a little.

"If she can teach me anything of self-bettering," he continued, "I'm glad to learn, and I take another lesson, to-night."

And, as was a custom, he passed around the note.

"In humility?" said Aubrey, stretching himself to be brushed down.

"Or ambition?" said Hoyle.

"God knows, I cannot say."

"If it is the last it will be the first," said Aubrey, jokingly. "Mind, I warn you."

"I warn you also," said Hoyle, soberly, as the others rose to leave. "I once sailed a little along that way, but I saw the beacon on the hill."

XXVII

“And fellowship . . . almost twanged a bow.”

DE LORNE called later than the other young men who came that night, and some one ran up and told Nannie that her “friend” had come. She started down, her hand upon the rail, sliding. But she stopped — hesitated some seconds, and ran back into her room.

It was a sensation so new, what might it mean? When had she ever gone to a deliberate engagement with any man but Bent? The other meetings with De Lorne had seemed so accidental, or incidental at least, but this one was so dreadfully purposeful. However, Kate was scolding her, and she heard the president’s voice call anxiously up the stairs from below, asking if Miss Ditmer were in her room; and she went down. She found other couples there in deep conversation — even the giggling stage had been already reached by some, as they sat in isolated pairs; and she had to run the gauntlet

of their gaze, for De Lorne was standing far over in one corner. She stepped to him frankly, but with a burning face; and he put out his hand in a free, open way, placing her at once much at ease. For this she felt kindly toward him and shortly she was half grateful to him for coming. His visit was a pleasant break in the every-day chatter of the girls, and it was nice to have some one come from the great outer world and show an interest in her little own.

The evening passed pleasantly. He was inspired by her attention. He became confidential, and unfolded his life in the past and his ambitions in the future with all the commonplace sentiment of such things. They lifted the girl — were new to her; and she responded with her own hopes till each felt a personal interest in the other's outlook, and their confidences stirred an atmosphere which was not the usual air that they had been breathing. It was the old, old thing which in youth holds us sane while the real world goes dizzying by.

He ended with a sort of rhapsody:—

There ought to be some place, he said, where we are at our best—at least some condition. Sometimes he had thought it was a friend, a

personal contact which provoked us to all we should be. There ought to be some ideal — ah — *some one*, — some soul supplement of our own self — almost a soul complement in his case, he reckoned; some eye which looked an interest, some faith which anchored in you — some hand that stretched, some —

The bell rang, loud and clangorous, in the hall.

"I would not have you think," he added, as they drifted outward behind the rest, "that I have no belief in myself alone, but that I believe in my surroundings more. My creed is not myself plus my surroundings, but my surroundings plus myself. They are the integer and I am the factor. They —"

But the second bell was tapping and the young men moving out.

When Nannie went to her room, Kate said: "Come, 'fess up! Didn't you see him with pleasure — didn't you?"

"Saw him leave so," said Nannie, laughing in her eyes an admission of Kate's impeachment.

"That isn't true. Your face doesn't show it. Now, honor bright, weren't you fascinated — just a little — your admiration stimulated?"

"No, it was my pity" — still laughing.

"Pity, pity! My goodness, girl! why should you or any woman pity Ralph De Lorne?"

"I cannot tell you" — seriously.

"Umhoonh! confidences and all that. Swear you?"

"No, hush!"

"Silence, too! Mum's the word. Pity, confidence, silence! Do you know pity's kinsfolk?" said the girl.

"No, what do you mean?"

"Why, 'pity is akin to love,' the poet says."

"Stuff! Let's go to bed."

"And do you know what are pity's paths?"

"No, listen, there's the 'lights out' bell."

"You listen: 'The straightest to a woman's heart,' some one has said. Let me tell you, Nannie Ditmer, the woman that pities Ralph De Lorne ought —"

"To be asleep," said Nannie, yawning, and blowing out the light.

"No, very, very wide awake indeed," said the chum, as she crept in the dark to bed.

Nannie lay awake long that night. In some way a new interest had come into her life. She could not analyze it. She was his friend surely.

She had never had such a friend — had never sounded the depths of congenial sociability between boy and girl. Her life through she had been that of a sweetheart only, and now she was awake to the fact that to even this there were realms beyond.

He came again, of course, and they talked of things of mutual interest. He sketched a little yet, and had once sketched more, but had thrown it aside, he said, as the amusement of a season or so. He sang sometimes, and now and then he hummed a snatch in undertones to her, asking if she had heard that, or how did she like this, and it ran this way, etc.; and the subdued strains of his rich voice seemed a new, thrilling thing to her who had never heard masculine tones so soft and tender — especially so close to her, and humming for no other ear but hers. In comparison with the operatic shrieks of the average schoolgirl practising the average selection made for her, there was something very soothing in sounds which were music without being noise.

Sometimes she drew herself up with a tight rein at the yielding which she could feel herself making — at her selfishness in this. Her pity

for him was all gone now as they met more frequently, and frankness, in its place, felt no need of anything but opportunity; and fellowship, feathering the shaft of incident, almost twanged a bow.

XXVIII

"Wondering if in some things he were not a corpse — hung about somebody's neck."

WHILE Dick and Nannie had been corresponding, little messages of banter and semi-impudent compliment had been passing between him and her room-mate, Kate. It ran on, as such things will, in Margery Daw style, till the two felt a real interest in each other, and wished that they could meet.

Nannie had therefore invited Kate home with her for the holidays, and the latter was glad to go. But the sister reserved this girl's coming as a Christmas surprise for her brother — bidding her mother to prepare, but to keep the matter close. She let Bent into the secret, and wrote that he must contrive to have Dick at the station in town, ready to drive out home, and he himself must be there — with his buggy.

It happened that, when the holidays ap-

proached, both schools were out at the same time.

De Lorne therefore went homeward with the girls; but since Kate was so instant he had little chance for talk with Nannie—alone.

It was a wild train of silly, happy hearts, blabbing their joy in folly; for, between stops on the cars, perhaps earth holds no sillier thing than the average student—few softer things than the travelling schoolboy and his girl.

At last the engine shrieked for her station, and, as he went to help them off, De Lorne lagged a little in the car-aisle with Nannie, and said tenderly in an undertone how much worth it had been to him to know her and be with her, and that, when they returned, he hoped to see her more, if she would allow him. Then she blushed the consciousness of what he meant, and with another thrill saw the brakeman swing his long coat-tails high in straining effort to keep the train from running past.

The student stepped out on the platform to help her and her friend off, and he saw her rush into the arms of a stout, short, masculine figure, and then approach shyly, with

both hands extended, a tall, handsome one. Then he thought again of Hoyle and what he had said.

The girl looked back at the platform where De Lorne stood—and she moved a little that way, as if she felt that she ought to introduce him, but she hesitated; and the bell began to ring. The tall figure gazed at the stranger and he at it; Nannie stood between, looked up at the face of the man beside her, and then she turned and saw the other form lift his hat and bow, and swing gracefully on to the rear platform of the starting train, turn—bow again and wave his hand in military salute. Then, as if in a vision, he grew smaller, smaller, smaller, and melted into the distant cut and curve.

Nannie turned to introduce Kate Sunderland to Bent and Dick—apologizing to them all, blushing, for her neglect. Her little scheme had worked: Dick took Kate in his buggy, while she herself rode with Bent, of course; and Uncle George in the farm wagon brought out the trunks.

But there was a queer restraint between the lovers—a little something beyond the embarrassment which a short separation some-

times brings to the best of friends before they can get warmed up to each other again. Each sought through queries about the daily life of the other, to find a lively topic or an easy pose for talk ; but his life was so humdrum, and hers so out of all that he could conceive, that they frequently sat in a bewildering silence.

He came over often, but his visits were not satisfactory to himself. Dick was there a great deal also, and was such a clown that nothing but fun prevailed in the parlor ; and though this was amusing Kate, a lover accepted likes something more than sport.

In the stress of company, Nannie had to be out much, assisting, and this left Bent unpaired and lonely. He took, therefore, to happening out in the hall, pretending to want his kerchief from his overcoat or something of that sort ; but really he hoped for better things.

Sometimes these came, as in her long cook-apron, so beautifully suggesting the girlish form beneath — so sweetly setting her back to his “little girl” again — Nannie would dodge out quickly from the kitchen to the flour-barrel under the stairs. At the mischief-light in his eyes, which she had learned to read so well,

she would threaten him with the lard-spoon or the white flour-prints of her fingers upon his black Sunday suit. Long she would ward him off, darting this way and that, but he would spring before her as she grabbed the tray to run, and detain her till the cry came sharp from the cook that the grease was burning and the gravy would be spoiled. Then she put up her cheek as a compromise, and he would let her pass at that, and stand wiping his mouth like a toper, not daring, while yet so self-conscious, to go in there where those four sharp eyes were watching.

One day when he did go in rather suddenly he saw two heads, very near each other over a book, part quickly at his coming, and two sparkling eyes look sharply at him wonderingly, while Dick did not seem so awfully funny now. Then he felt again that he ought to be out of the way; so he slammed the hall door loudly and stepped out.

"I like the fellow," Kate said, when Bent was gone. "There seems something very genuine and determined about him."

Then Dick spoke of Bent in flaring, but honest, phrase:—

"He isn't cultured in the usual sense, but he's been around and knows the world and meets it on its own footing—peace or war—and wins. He has a heart like Moses' rock if you smite it right—like it also if you smite it wrong. I often wonder what he would have been, had better opportunities come to him. Perhaps he would not have been so true or self-sacrificing as he is. I should hate to meet him in a case before a jury if he knew the law, or if he did not know it, for that matter, and his cause was just."

Bent was feeling fairly good again—the old-time confidence was coming to him as he walked, when he looked up and saw a buggy at the pasture gate. The man's figure in it seemed familiar, but he could not place it. The stranger drove up with a jaunty air, and asked if Mr. Ditmer lived there. Bent replied that he did, and invited him in.

They walked into the house, each wondering as he went, and came suddenly into the parlor, where Nannie, still in her apron, had run in a moment.

"Why, Ralph De Lorne!" said Kate. "Who was expecting you here? This is Mr. Ditmer."

Do you know Mr. Hickman who came in with you? and this is — I think you and *Miss* Ditmer have met before."

De Lorne was his easy self to all, but —

Bent had never seen anything like that in Nannie's face. He knew not what it was, but it was all there, and she did not recover from it while she stayed.

Could it be that she was embarrassed by "the way she was fixed up?" Beyond this he was suspicious. Why should this fellow come back before the holidays were out, and hire a horse to come away out here — unless he were Kate's friend. And he grasped eagerly at this straw.

But that afternoon he sank, notwithstanding this, into the depths. Kate did not talk to the stranger, and De Lorne had no eyes for any one but Nannie.

After dinner, when they all sat again in the parlor, the four chatted gaily of their college life — for Dick had been there once — and they said bright silly things; but Bent, having nothing in common in this, sat silent, and could not even pretend an interest. Sometimes they caught themselves away from their exclusive-

ness of topics, and turned to him, trying to draw him into the conversation. This was especially the case with Nannie, and De Lorne joined her always; but the effort had ever the tinge of an apology in it—even a trace of pity and unconscious condescension—things which the farmer saw, and which increased his restraint.

At last he left, feeling as if he had been a corpse in their midst, and wondering late that night—with tears upon his pillow, as if he had been a girl—wondering if in some things he were not a corpse—hung about somebody's neck.

XXIX

"Nannie, I'm not the bed-rock any longer. . . . I'm the molten lava at her touch."

NEXT morning Bent saw the strange horse and rider pass the lane going into town; and that evening he went again over to the Ditmers'.

He felt glad at finding Hoyle there — for they were friends and understood each other; but when the conversation became general, it was the same thing again.

How his boyhood friend had broadened and deepened, and how far was he ahead! — and she — she was abreast of this college youth in every stride. So he arose to go early, with despair in his heart; and Nannie looked astonishment at his departure, but Kate, reading his face, followed him out into the hall.

"Promise me," she said, very kindly, "that you will come over once to see *me* before I go."

He had not liked this girl. She had been in his way. Nannie often scolded him because he

would not help her entertain her friend, when Dick was not there.

What boy has not failed at this old demand, and gloried in his failure to be agreeable in one direction while his whole heart was streaming out in another?

To Kate's keen eye the whole situation was apparent.

One day, when Dick had ridden to town, to return that night, Bent had gone over, but Nannie was busy preparing for extra company, and was much of the time out of the room. He was in the depths again, when Kate dropped beside him, and poured earnest phrases of Nannie's praise into his ear. She told him of the girl's standing at school with her friends, the teachers, and the students even. She did not mention De Lorne personally, but said he must watch out.

And again his heart fell.

"I used to see your letters come," she said. "I knew there *must* be a man that loved her, and I wondered what sort you were, and felt well toward you. Now that I know you, you won't mind if I say I like you, will you? You are worth a dozen fops. I love you as my friend's lover and I can trust you with her."

She reached him her hand. He took it and beamed such a happy, hungry face upon her that she felt a tear in her eye and her own heart bound in a sweet sympathy.

In his consciousness of his lack of the finer things, he told her how low he had sunk—even to thinking that he would give Nannie up. What was he going to be able to throw into that partnership which should pay her for her sacrifice?

"As if a woman were ever paid or ever wanted to be paid," she said.

"But I don't believe she cares for me now, since—"

"Stuff!" she said. "I've seen her kiss the corners of your letters when she did not know I was about. Do you know anything about 'A Turkey's Nest'? She has a little sketch—nothing in it to me, but I have seen her cry over that and—I'll show it to you."

She rose almost into his face, which was drawn so tensely that she stopped, and both their hands met each to each.

Suddenly Nannie came in; and for the first time in his life she was an intruder in it, and his face showed it a little. Then there was a

bit of embarrassment as the two let each other's hands fall and turned to her.

"Why, what's the matter with you two?" said Nannie. "You are both blushing and so — conscious."

Bent could not say a word, but looked at Kate, who also remained silent awhile.

"I've been telling Mr. Hickman how much I loved him," said the latter, quite demurely.

A solemn silence.

"And he has been telling me how much he likes to hear it," she continued.

Bent stood mute, his heart hurting, as he saw the words go home; but a glance from Kate held him still.

Nannie had never known anything like this — a dart of jealousy had never lodged in her breast before. She reeled a trifle, her under lip in her teeth, and sank upon her chair. Into her dizzy brain came the picture of De Lorne waving, bowing, and of Bent upon the platform. She looked at him now an instant and at the half-impudent pose of her friend. Her lip came out and quivered, she curled an arm upon the chair-back, buried her face in the angle of her elbow, and the coach was going, —

vanishing, — the bowing, smiling, waving figure was smaller and smaller still.

"I told him that I liked him as *your* lover," said a whisper at her ear, "and he liked me because I loved and praised *you*," it added softly.

"And it was so sweet to hear it," said a deeper, hoarser whisper, "she said she could trust you with me, and *I* loved *her* for *that*."

And a silly face came simpering up through tears, brightening, and Kate fled, clicking the door-latch tight as she went, and stamping hard upon the stairs as she ran up to her room.

A moment or so later Miss Sunderland looked out and saw a buggy and a rotund figure coming from the pasture gate. Then she walked to the mirror, arranged this wisp of hair and that, patted ribbons here and there, pulled out pins and put them in again, swung right and left, and turned her back, glancing over her shoulders — her lithe, neat waist twisting, swaying. She turned again, shook out her skirts, and then — she was so unconsciously on the stair, just coming down, as Dick opened the front door of the hall.

She feigned not to see him — *did* not see

him—for an instant—acting as if he were some one about the house just going out or in—she cared not which—but she looked up in time; and in just a little start and gasp, a look, a smile, an eye-flash and an attitude—she was as frank to him as she had been to Bent—had met him half-way without a word, had conquered and had surrendered in a pose.

He sprang forward the little distance which was left him—a step or so up—put out his hand, and she took it, swept her lashes low an instant, turned her face away from the fervid gaze beneath, leaving the arch of her neck toward him; and the upward outline of that and the chin above made a change of venue of all his cases in the court of love.

“I just simply can’t do without you,” he said, saying the old thing. “Tell me before I go in there that I need not!”

And again she spoke never a word, but she told him.

“Nannie,” he said, as he led Kate in. “I’m not the bed-rock or the Azoic any longer. I’m the inner, deeper molten lava at her touch. Kiss me!”

“And me!” cried Kate.

"Poor me!" said Bent, half mockingly.
"Can't you kiss me, Dick?"

"By proxy? Yes," motioning.

And then this great-hearted fellow felt for the first time in his life the thrill of a woman's friendly kiss upon his cheek, and Dick and Nannie clung to each other — the latter's heart beating high, while she thought all sorts of things about platonic love.

"Oh, Dick!" she said, "I am sometimes so near to being a fool again," and she hid her face upon his shoulder.

"Sister to what your own brother *has* been, my dear; but I'm a second Solomon now. You'll have to brace up."

XXX

“I fear a little for you all.”

THE months swept on again at college. Often Nannie met De Lorne. He was studying harder now, he said. He had found an inspiration—a new one; and she could not help knowing what he meant. Sometimes he had with him little sketches of rocks and picturesque bluffs or pinnacles which were on the creek near by, and bits of pools and lanes and grassy slopes.

Sometimes he would walk up on Saturday afternoons, call for the president, and frankly ask for the privilege of showing a water-color sketch to Miss Ditmer; and when he laid it on the table the stern man knew that it was so good that he ought not to deny any art pupil the chance to see it. Often the early-blooming wild flowers would be there—the very flower she had been thinking of and longing for.

Of all these things he spoke appreciatively,

brought her books upon the subject, and quoted the poets upon the themes with an aptness which she had never dreamed of.

Stimulated by the atmosphere of girlish youth about her, lonesome and homesick at times, she yielded to all this soft suggestiveness. He grew to stand to her as a representative of the fields and woods, an ambassador from the vernal world where she would so much like to roam, and from which, for the first time in her life, she was cut off.

"Ah, me!" he would sigh and say, "I do wish I could take a walk with you in the woods now. I see things in a new light through your evident interest in them. I don't know any one that I can talk to as I can to you. You put me at my best, and I am proud of myself while with you. Why can't all girls be frank and sensible? With others I am frivolous, but you — you sober me."

Then she would fairly grate her teeth to keep from telling him that she was feeling much the same thing concerning him. And she trembled to think of what any responsiveness might mean to him — or her.

When he was away she was strong again, her

mind filled with home scenes and home folk. It was his presence which affected her,—his immediate personality under the circumstances. Once, after he had left, she ran from him up to her room and sketched further upon the “Turkey’s Nest,”—a tear—a briny mixture of she knew not what—splashing upon the paper.

Stimulated by De Lorne’s work, she took to water-colors, and had improved so much that she began to succeed well with figures.

Sometimes, however, she rose above her art and sentiment, and in these saner moods she sized things up a little. In De Lorne’s frequent coming it dawned on her that his intellectual resources were few. He based his favor too much upon his frailties and needs. She had not heard yet of anything which he had done in school. There was no solidity to his mind. It seemed to lap around things—the prettier things—flowed around them as an amoeba takes its food—without mastication, without jaws or stomach even, with nothing but a body—a transparent medium merely, through which the undigested mass shone out.

In another way, this fluidity of his mind delighted her. When she was cool to him,

after the eagerness of his eyes had said so much, his very submissiveness was appealing, and his plasticity, both present and promising, was delightful. She could feel him yield as she had felt the clay move in her fingers in her old mud-pie days. It was sweet to realize herself as a force—she had lain so long in weakness—to know that he was so adaptive. Her touch seemed so creative and the resilience so slight, that she felt that at least she had not failed to mould. But as she heard from him again and again, she could not see that he was any better when away from her than he had been in his confessions the first time that she had met him.

One receiving night, while in this mood, she left him at the door and ran up to her room. She saw Kate study her a moment as they sat and talked for a while of the folks at home, wondering what Dick in town and Bent out on the dreary farm were doing now.

“Nannie, do you think you ought to encourage Ralph De Lorne as much as you do?”

“I don’t encourage him; he just *comes*.”

“And you *just see* him?” said Kate.

"He is a very pleasant friend. I like to listen to him, and I learn so much," said Nannie.

"And what is he learning?"

"I don't know. Not much, I guess."

"Why does he come, then?"

"He likes to teach, I suspect. All men like to do that. He says I listen well. All men like to hear themselves listened to, don't they?"

"Yes, by some women. I know what he is learning, Nannie. He can't help it."

"What's that?"

"He's learning to love you, or has learned long ago."

"But he must know about Bent."

"That would not make a particle of difference with a man like him — especially while Bent was away."

"Does he so like to overcome difficulties? I am beginning to think not."

"No, not the usual kind," said Kate; "but he is persistent in the line of his love. Every man is."

"Stuff, Kate! don't fear for him — but — but do you fear for me or — or — Bent?"

"I fear a little for you all."

XXXI

"Where are you going, Bent Hickman?"

WIDER and wider Bent Hickman went, deeper and deeper he plunged into the country, buying and shipping, that in material things he might express a love which, as he felt now, could not phrase itself in finer terms.

One night he found himself with a newly purchased herd driven in to ship from this old college town as the nearest railroad point. In going about he fell in with Hoyle, who was sincerely glad to see him, and who felt that the hospitalities of the place must be shown his old county friend.

"Oh, say, Hickman," he said with a shoulder slap, "there's an 'open session' of the Philomathean up at the college to-night. You must go."

"What! in these duds?" said the drover, not knowing what either an "open session" or a "Philomathean" was, but conscious of his needs.

"Can't I lend you something?"

"Well, I've never yet worn any other fellow's toggery — and —"

"Ah, well, I'll tell you," said Hoyle, on a new tack. "It's not you and I that are showing off, you know. I've got some clothes like those with me, and *I* wear 'em around here, when I tramp about. I'd wear 'em up there if I wanted to. Two girls are up there to-night — on the programme, whom you and I know. Good at guessing?"

"I think I know," said Bent, but his face was full of pain. "I went up to college once with my pants in my boots."

"Now, I'll tell you. Come go to supper with me."

"Can't do that — haven't time."

"Well, I'll meet you at the hotel, and we'll go up late, take a back seat or stand up more likely, see a little, and nobody we know need see us, and —"

"I'll go," said Bent, for a great hunger to see a certain sweet face was gnawing in his heart. "I'll go if you'll never tell that I was there."

When Hoyle called by, the great-hearted fellow in his crude delicacy was dressed so much

like Hickman, that Aubrey passed his friend, and did not know him.

Bent had seen country exhibitions and had gone to one once in town; but the blaze of splendor here was bewilderingly beyond his experience. Hoyle led him to a corner, and they stood next the wall, overlooking lower standers and the flutter of fans and fluff of pretty swan-like white things up near and on the stage.

He could not see a face that he looked for, but at last Kate arose and did her part to the evident satisfaction of every one, judging from the applause, except that there was a student near, who hissed often and caterwauled — once too often.

The president had made appeal after appeal that this noise be stopped. The fellow was one of those students who thought that, when he went out among the girls, he must take a little wine to make him brilliant, and he had overdosed himself to-night.

"Hoyle, can't we shut that fellow off some way?" said Bent.

"I think we can. Say, here," he said, whispering to the student. "That lady was our friend, and the next is — is — our friend also.

Don't say a word," as the grip tightened on his shoulder. "Come back here between us. If you 'cheep' while she reads, or any more at all, for that matter, we'll shut off your wind first and then take you out!"

And another brawny hand laid on the other shoulder brought him back against the wall, between two towering forms; and gazing first into one determined face, then the other, the fellow was scared into a meek silence and almost into soberness itself.

Then Nannie arose and read. It was a schoolgirl's essay, but in it a girl's heart held to the old things with a face set toward the new. It was full of a hope that sailed while yet it anchored; it was like a bird that fluttered but did not fly—a wing that beat against a wire.

There were three that heard her who read *things* in it. One in the audience gloried and rejoiced; one on the stage thought fast and wondered; while the third far back in the corner hung his head over a heavy heart and said, "*I'll do it*," with a voice so firm and purposeful that Hoyle looked askance, and the tipsy student between them cowered a little lower.

At the close of the session Bent saw many congratulating Nannie, the president and other older persons coming up — for her heart-cry had stirred a chord. Young men surrounded her, and he saw De Lorne's approach and her evident pleasure at his coming. Then he felt that he himself had no business there. How grateful was he that no one knew he *was* there. This was her place — her sphere. He would never ask her to leave the possibilities of this and go with him far out upon a wind-swept, lonesome prairie farm.

As his head went down upon his breast, the girl had looked out for Hoyle, whose honest commendation she had expected and whose hearty sympathy with her theme she well knew. At last she saw his face far back there, just as De Lorne reached his hand, and her heart bounded at his resemblance to some one else whom she knew. She threw him a smile and bow which, passing above Bent's bowed head almost upset his sturdy friend. She thought of the struggling heart at home, but neither knew that her glance of good-will had almost brushed his cheek.

But another eye, keen and kindly, had seen

the farmer before he bowed, knew him, and in a flash had read the forlornness in his face. She saw him start out with the crowd, and she fled the stage and ran around the house, gained the exit with a dash.

"Where are you going, Bent Hickman?"

"Kate, for God's sake don't ever tell that I was here to-night."

"Come, go with me a moment."

"I can't. I am not dressed to—I went to her once this way. I'm never going to her again in any way. I'm glad I am *not* dressed up."

"Out with it, sir," banteringly. "I do not understand."

She asked Hoyle to excuse him, and she drew him off into an alcove, where no one was near.

"It is something that I cannot utter. I can only suffer it," he said.

Her manner changed. "Tell me!" Her voice was pleading and so sympathetic. "I think I know."

"I must give her up. I cannot supply what she is getting here or what she may get by—by—and—and I never—*can*—" And his voice slipped.

"Why, man, she has never thought of not loving you. She is the soul of —"

"It is not that," he looked up quickly and said, "nor is it that I do not love her amid all this. But she must have elements in her nature that I cannot stir — ideals, ambitions which she cannot satisfy if she's joined to me. I shall narrow — I know I shall — every man does as he toils. It is all so narrowing, and it's a pity to draw her to my life — my little channel."

"But your great love for her, has it no claims?"

"Oh, I love her so, I love her so, that I can almost — gladly give her up, that she may go, happy. Do you know that as I stood there to-night, while those cultured fellows came about, that the impulse came to me that I ought to strike her, to hurl something at her, just to save her from myself, as I did once to —"

"Yes, yes," said Kate, "she told me."

"That I ought to strike her," he resumed, "there in her success, so that she would hate me, and would be free to choose whom she might?"

"It was a noble thought," said Kate, trying to be light, "but it is old. You've been reading

‘The Cricket on the Hearth,’ or something like that.”

“No!” he said, “I never —”

“Well, she would not have hated you any way, but would think you crazy and love you more. That’s such a woman as she is, such a woman as many a woman is, and you don’t know her yet, sir.”

“But this — this poetic and artistic nature of hers,” he said, “how am I going to satisfy all that? I knew she sketched a little, but I never knew that she wrote — and — and — could think and hope so — though I knew she was growing. Now must I hold her down to the tame commonplace of —”

The girl lifted her hand and he stopped. Her first expression was one of admiration. She did not know that all this, ordinary as it was in the literature of fiction, was in him, nor that he would phrase his sentiment so. This expression of her face yielded to a sort of contempt mingled with tender sympathy, but she purposely hardened herself a little into a scolding mood.

“Bent Hickman, you don’t know a woman, and, as I was saying, you certainly do not know

this girl. I'll take you around and introduce her to you if you like. You talk of a woman's growth, and artistic and literary nature, and all that, and think you are learned, and yet forget the thing which is basic in her—her instincts. A woman has an intuition of love. Out of her impulses, she knows not why, and cares not, she creates a realm of love, and lives in it. She may know its defects, swing away from it a little at times, but she revels in it just the same, and takes her talents, her poetry, her art, her all, and decorates it—bringing them to her love, not carrying her love to them. Do you heed me? Her love is first—always first—and these things are trifles. A man's love may reason, as yours has to-night, and is dangerous for that flaw, no matter how it trends—even if nobly, as yours has done; but a woman's—it just abides."

A little, energetic, middle-aged lady passed them just then, and Kate cried to her:—

"Miss Lagrange, can I have the key to the art room a moment? I want to show this gentleman here a picture."

Miss Lagrange was the art teacher.

"The key is in the door, Miss Kate. Go in."

They strolled off that way, and found a few others in there; and Bent's face cleared a little as she led him around. She got him into a livelier mood, and was much amused and interested in his comments, which were often quaint criticisms upon certain animal poses and structure.

He said the cow biting at the bough should have her tongue out, and the horse taking the apple from the little golden-haired girl should be reaching with his lip and not with his teeth; and he laughed outright at "The Lost Lamb," bleating while it showed a row of upper teeth in front; and so on.

"Oh, no," she said, "you cannot help any one artistically, can you? Do you know that art is truth — and — and — just that other thing — love? You'll say art is beauty — but it isn't. Art is the *use* of beauty for these two other things, and nothing else is art."

Bent could grasp the consolations of these statements, though he could scarcely analyze them.

"Here are some of Nannie's sketches," she said, opening a small portfolio.

And he turned them, leaf by leaf, admiringly.

"And back here," said Kate, "is that one I

tried to show you once. It's a favorite, and on a separate board. She called it 'The Turkey's Nest.' I don't know why. Do you?"

"I think I do," he said, his face relaxing a little.

The girl stood and watched the far-away light as it brightened, till he caught himself as he jerked his breath, and smiled.

"How do you know that you do not inspire much of this art?" Kate asked, venturing in a wild guess. "This girl has loved you life-long—from her babyhood, she tells me. What must a man be that could keep all this alive and growing for fifteen years or more? If—if—I had lived in love so long as that"—she faltered, flushed with her own freshly aroused affections—"such love—I should be a poet, too, in thought, at least, and an artist in head and heart, if not in hand. You underrate yourself. You have made her, and you will make her still."

"But can she feel this—"

"In every quaver of her soul. You are not only her inspiration, whereby she works, but that by which she prophesies—the fulfilment—the end of the law to her in everything."

She pushed him a little further down to a large easel near the light, with a paper cover over the work upon it. She set a lamp before it.

"This is her last work, nearly done now; see, her color-cake is not dry yet. Let me tell you what she said to me as she outlined it:—

"‘This is my ideal scene, Kate. It has such sweet associations to me, though I was in the humiliation of dust and ashes then, because I had done wrong, as I’ve so often done!’

"‘But where’s your ideal figure?’ I said.

"‘I shall put it in as I once saw it there. *It was my inspiration to my little art.*’

"And she has worked upon that figure," continued Kate, "day by day, since she learned color, and I have seen her face light with love as she drew and erased and drew again with patience.

"You have been criticising figures to-night, and I like your taste. Criticise this and tell me what is wrong about it!"

She lifted quickly the cover from the board, and there: a ford, a road curving, a pebbly roll of ripples, a pool of shadows beyond, and a bank rocky and projecting; a twist of trees above, a hill rising to meet a sky stripe—and a

horseman stretching his weary self as his tired beast drank.

It was himself, every line and shape, every wrinkle of his clothing, every round of his muscles, and the swell of the bones beneath—the very sinews seemed to quiver on the paper as he stretched himself almost in the very clothes he now wore.

He dropped spineless into the worker's chair, still beside her easel, and held his face a moment, then he arose and covered the sketch, and snatched the paper off again; and anon he looked up and laughed, like a pleased child, into Kate's beaming face. She saw his eyes swim and his whole mood relax.

"God sent you to me in my despair," he said solemnly, as if it were a prayer. "An angel does not have to wear wings."

"Not even skirts," she said, pointing to the picture's figure—"some persons' angels. Listen: I asked her one day what she would call her picture when it was done; and she replied that she did not know. Only one name had come to her yet; and that was the queerest title! You would never guess it—yes, yes, you might too. Try it."

"Let's see," he said, studying, "'Flint Creek Ford'?"

"No."

"'The Baptismal Pool'?"

"No."

"'The Rocky Way'?"

"No. It was something about the figure."

"'Rough and Ready,' I reckon," he said laughing, his tones dropping as though he gave it up.

"No, but you are 'hot,' as the children say. Try again."

"No, I give it up. What was it?"

"'A Raw Angel'!"

He laughed a pleased chuckle — got almost boisterous, then sobered.

"Well," he said, as he rose up, straightening further his shining face. "Hers may be raw — doubtless is, but Dick's is well done — right to a turn."

"Dick's what?"

"Dick's angel, that's what."

"Flatterer!"

"No woman ever accused me of that before."

"I take it back. Say, you can keep a secret, can't you, till, till — and you can be surprised again some day, when you see these?"

"Every day — any day," he said.

"She'd pound me," said Kate, "if she knew I had stolen — her — her — "

"Sugar?" said Bent.

"Can't you do better than that?" she asked.

"Blessings," he replied soberly. And they went out and down a narrow hall, as the bell rang.

She led him a little way and showed him a side way out.

"Good-by, and blessings on you for your friendship," he said, turning soberly, then smiling: "We may be sister and brother yet."

"I think I should like it for that reason only, if for nothing else," she said, blushing up into his face.

And he bent down and kissed her forehead, as if she were a child.

XXXII

“And his sad face haunted her all the way home.”

It was the custom of the president to give, to the twelve girls who had the best grades in the three higher classes, a strawberry supper in the last of May; and Nannie's standing put her easily in the group. Each girl, if she cared, could select a gentleman friend to share her festival with her. Nannie chose Hoyle, because he was from her county, she said to herself and her friends.

“Why did you not let me see you at the open session?” she asked him when he came. “I expected at least that my fellow-county-man would speak to me that night.”

“I was with a friend, and he was not dressed for the stage,” he said.

“But you could have left him for a moment.”

“I was not dressed up either, and —”

“But I think you might have dressed up a little just for me. I beat my palms sore the

night you won in debate. I was so proud of you that I would have gone and given you my hand, if I could have broken ranks. Why *didn't* you dress up, sir?" she said banteringly.

"Because, as my friend could not dress up, I dressed *down* to him."

"So you thought more of him than of me —"

"Not by a long shot," he said, so significantly that she regretted her speech.

"You should have remembered that I was from your county. He was not."

"Oh, wasn't he, though?" he said, with a sly twinkle.

He saw her gasp!

"He was Kate's brother, she told me so herself," she said.

He saw that he had made some kind of blunder. There was a very evident silence for a while.

"Was his name Sunderland, Mr. Hoyle?"

Poor Hoyle!

"No, it was not that. He was Miss Kate's *half*-brother, I suspect."

He looked across the room, smiled in return for a recognition and a warning there, then

turned to Aubrey and uttered a commonplace. By the time his glances got back to Nannie, her eyes were searching him again.

"Did he swear you not to tell his name, Mr. Hoyle?"

"No, but — I — think — under the circumstances — he would rather — I should not say —"

"Then your friend was ashamed of his *name* as well as his clothes?"

"I think," he replied with a deep significance, "that he was afraid some one else would be ashamed of his clothes, and that his name had better not go with such as he had on that night."

"Ah! then it is his friends that are ashamed of him yet."

"Not his *friends*, I'd have you know, if we do not tell his name. I think we are proud enough of him because we know his worth, and ashamed that any one who loved him could ever have scorned him. He had an experience of that sort once, he said. He has a sweetheart here, but he fears her, thinks that she would be ashamed of him—in his rough manners and old clothes. I'm sure she would not, if she

knew all," he added later, and he looked quizzingly into her face.

"I'm sure she could not," she replied, not knowing all he meant, but answering out of her heart.

And the waiters came in with the refreshments, and later Kate slid up to Hoyle's side, and he and Aubrey "changed girls."

The matter worried Nannie. It all looked so much like Bent, if he *had* chanced to come. She was growing homesick, anyway, in the near approach of the end—sick for the old scenes with him, now that these were cloying her.

Dick came to see Kate and her, of course, and comforted his sister to some extent by his presence, but after he left she was in the depths again.

At times De Lorne sent up his card, but she excused herself, as a woman can, and refused to see him.

One day the whole college took a picnic in a pasture near, under the chaperonage of the faculty. The student boys were there, and, in view of the end so near, many an affair was settled on that day.

De Lorne came around, he and Aubrey. Kate resolved that Nannie should not get far from her, at least with him; for there was a seriousness in his face betokening trouble. Once, however, she was called to help spread the repast, and the pair went strolling off almost out of sight.

He knew of a bed of flowers, he said, the very ones recently painted by him. She ought to see them; and really Nannie wanted to see them very much. They went. She had admired them, and they had turned, when he began in the old way about their common sympathies. He was in the act of saying more, and she had put up her hand in protest, when Kate saw them halt, and sent Aubrey shouting and running up to say that the dinner was all spread.

And the three strolled back together.

His words and manner had much affected Nannie. She could not cast away the idea of helping him. His weakness was again so appealing. His needs seemed so great.

Under this influence she wrote him a note later—a note prompted by the other side of herself; but it was worded in the phrases of her old communion with him. She said that he

must not speak again as he had begun, that she appreciated much all that he had been to her, and hoped to hear such great things of him, but that their paths parted soon.

So the blow was softened almost into a caress, and he did not lose all hope. When she left the town soon after, before he did, he swung significantly to her hand stretched from the car window, ran along the platform, and said in a low voice that this was not the end.

Before she could reply or rebuke him the train was gone, but she leant outward a little and looked back, and his sad face, as he stood there, so forlorn, upon the platform, haunted her all the way home.

XXXIII

"You talk it . . . but . . . he *is* it. You dress up in them . . . but . . . they are *his* old clothes."

At home Nannie was strong again in her normal sphere, content in her rounds of duty and happy in peace from the struggles of her past.

Occasionally she received a passionate note from De Lorne, but she did not reply; and she had no fear of seeing him again, for she had resolved not to return to school.

She did not dare to visit Kate, for the latter lived near De Lorne's home; but she easily prevailed upon her friend to come into the country and spend part of the summer there. The quartet of the two girls with Bent and Dick were very happy as the hot days went by.

One day, after Kate had gone and Nannie was blue at her departure, De Lorne drove up, and when he saw that she was at home, sent his carriage back to town. He had come be-

cause Kate was gone, and he had burned his bridges behind him — a guest in the house till he should know his fate.

Bent came once, and De Lorne met him open-palmed and with a frank, free manner which told the farmer what the newcomer's mission was. The great, rugged fellow saw again his rival's culture fit Nannie's palm as a sword's hilt, and anew that dazzling night swam in his head, and that heart-cry in her essay smote his ear.

Kate was not here now to bring him from the depths, and he rejoiced in his better moods that she was not — revelled in his misery — glad solemnly that Nannie should have the chance to make her choice uninfluenced. If she came to him after this there would not be a shade of doubt — if — if — Great God! the bitter thought — but she would be happy still. He told her that he would not come again till her guest was gone. Here and there he rode. He could not stay at home, nor anywhere else, long. He came in at night — went out — waited — feared — and hoped.

De Lorne made many feints, and Nannie had fended well. They took walks about the place.

He did not improve in her estimation by constant association. His theme was too monotonous, his resources too few. He heightened the burnish of many things, but he was not part of them, and there was nothing in him that hid defects. She found that, as the burning-glass had helped her, he had helped. He enhanced outlooks by lessening them into artistic grasp, and preventing the view from sweeping on. But he could not stretch himself and make a dead scene quiver into life.

One drouthy day, when the grass was sere and the fodder blades and dead weed-tops blew about in whirlwinds and went off like birds, they strolled along the big road in the shadow of the wood. The very earth looked weary, as if she wished that her work were done.

"My time is up to-day, Nannie. School begins to-morrow. You know what I have come for," he said, "for my — my life — my outlook, my all. I shall never really live without your love. I love *you* as I can love no other girl."

And then he launched into his old pleading of his need of her.

"Yes," she said, "you love me because you

think you need me, but — but a woman loves to need, and lives in need.”

“You are so strong,” he pleaded.

“You say so, and you think it. To you and with you, I may be in comparison, but there are times when I am water, and there are those to whom I am a wisp of vapor. You have mistaken me. My strength is an inspiration from your weakness. I am strong with you by contrast only.”

“But, Nannie, if you would marry me, we would —”

“To marry you would be a life of sacrifice. I ought not to refuse it, perhaps, for that reason; but a sacrifice may run — must run better — the other way — in the way of one’s own weakness. The good of sacrifice is that along with it you plead and pray and feel your frailty. With you I should command; I should never stoop or bend, and I need to bend. I have grown by bending, bowing.”

“I had believed yet that you loved me,” he began, “but that you had been influenced, infatuated — and —”

“I *do* love you, as I love a child. Perhaps I ought not to say it, but I think at times your

presence would be very sweet to me, as it has always been. I should like to have you near me all my life, if you would only stay my friend—and—and helper.” She hesitated a moment. “Yes, you have helped me much, and I pray God to bless you for that. I wish you well, but there must be coming certain days when a look at life through you would fail me—and—I should not like you then; and when I myself broke—stumbled, then what?”

“And when I break?” he said piteously.

“I do not know! I do not know!” she almost sobbed. “God help us when we break!”

They swung themselves along in the old college step—its very regularity and time reminding him so painfully. For a long while they were silent, and her pity arose again, so that she began to speak in the spirit of all she felt, but she held herself to her purpose.

“Our walks and talks have been glimpses only at the world, as we think of it. We have not struck life a blow yet. I fear it will fight back. There must be some one you can help—some one who will need you. *I do not.* There are others who need me. Knowing you,

as I do, I know that your strength also lies in something like that. If you cannot rouse yourself to this, you will never rise. But neither you nor I should reason out our motives. Don't marry any woman, just to help her, or to have her help you; but marry her *and* help her—some one you love and you don't know why, you don't care why, except that love impels; and then you will *have* to help or fail."

"May you not fail if you do not help—help me?" he said.

"I do not think that I should help you. You might never exert yourself with me. You estimate me too highly—you overrate my help."

They were passing, just at this instant, the panel of the turkey's nest, and, as she looked at it, he broke out passionately:—

"Nannie, look at me. You may never see me again, or may see me for all your life, as you decide. I am a man of the world, a man of means and culture, a man of a few talents congenial with your own—a man of serene temper and high ideals. Why should a crude country farmer, good though he is, who has simply grown up beside you—whose grace is

the mere accident of position — why should he come between us? Why — ”

Quick as a shot she turned on him, and she could almost feel the quiver of some one's sinews beneath her elbows, as he blanched.

“Because as I look through him, the world looks larger somehow — a something fierce to fight; but as I look at it through you, it is pretty, but so small — a mere miniature that I would not attack. Through him it is the thing itself.”

“But — but,” he stammered, “he cannot be artistic or poetic. Your nature must sometime feel that he cannot — ”

“Oh, yes, he can. You talk it, paint it — reflect it — but — but he — ” She hesitated a moment for an expression. “He *is* it. With you all these things are an enthusiasm — like your drawing which amused you for a season. But with him, they are constant things. You appreciate them, he inspires them. You dress up in them, at times, and they become you for a while, but he wears them unconsciously every day. They are *his old clothes*.”

“I did not mean,” he hastened to break in, “I — ”

"No, that's it," her voice so firm now that he cowered a little. "You look as though you never meant and never would. That's your trouble. I like a man that means. I'm going back," she added firmly, turning.

"And I'm not. I'm going on into town — shall walk in," he said.

She turned and said, "It is best. Good-by."

"Good-by, Nannie. May God bless and keep you!"

He reached his hand, and she put out hers, which he held an instant, and a great shudder ran over him. Her head dropped in sorrow a moment. He let her hand loose. Then they turned their backs toward each other — each a factor of the other's past — and they walked away — away, out into life — apart.

XXXIV

“Ah, yes. Don and I came back to save you — for *her*, I think. Do you know what became of Don ?”

OUT on the broad prairie two roads, cutting deep traces in the virgin sod, crossed each other in a giant X—the angles quite acute. One ran from the Flint Creek region into the little county town; the other left the limestone soil of the Missouri's slope, climbed the gentle water-shed, ran over the dividing ridge between the two great rivers, and reached on for the neighborhood of Prairie View and a little railroad station yet beyond.

Here and there on the horizon's wide expanse pillars of black smoke shot up, spread out, floated off, and gave the autumn haze a deeper set over the browning earth.

On the one road a lonely walker stepped with nervous tread, as if his strides kept time with a quickened heart, whence bitter things boiled up to muttered utterance, while his heels

ground into the dust. But for the life of one man, he thought, he might be happy — not humiliated — at least in outlook; and he clinched his teeth and shut his fingers tight. Why should this other one come early into her life, and sear it over till it was hardened to every softening influence from himself? Why had his mother's God put this great grief upon him? What was the use of feeling finer things? If culture did not count, then why not end — Why, he could kill — could kill at least himself!

Upon that other road a horse was loping a rapid gait, or swinging in an easy pace as his rider waked or mused. Sometimes the spur was set in cruel thrust, sometimes the rein was dropped and a caressing pat fell on the creature's neck.

Despair was in this heart, too, that day, that all his years of love should count for naught. There were no tidings yet that the end had come. That argued badly, for it had been a week — and such a week! Her visitor was basking in her smiles, that's what it meant — was happy in the light of his acceptance. Oh, if the suspense were over! He would rather

know the worst. Why would it not be better never to know at all?

He looked away to the south and saw a great storm of smoke boil up and swirl, and beneath it a dim light brightened it into a horrid grin of hate. The air, which had been quiet, rose as a gentle but petulant breeze—warmish in its touch; and the smell of burning things came with it in fitful puffs.

He brought his horse down to a walk, and, cursing yet his lot, defied the on-coming, devastating wave. He would pit her fate against its furious speed. If Don could outwalk it, why, well and good; if he could not, why then,—and he reached back and uncoiled his whip, and, holding its handle with a determined grip, rode slowly on.

At the great X of the roads he looked quickly westward upon the other one, and saw nothing; but as he turned his face toward the town there was a glimpse of something—a sort of tawny movement between the swaying of the tall grass-plumes. Then his horse, still walking slowly, carried him on.

But as he went the thing haunted him. He could not bear to think of any creature, even a

brute, going on into that black danger there, unwarned. He wondered that a dumb beast's instincts should not tell it better. He turned his horse and rode rapidly back searching, but the object was beyond the swell — yet going on. It must be mad. He galloped on further still, and then he saw — the man who was the author of his woe, and he knew him — knew him by his clothes and his easy, aristocratic gait.

A wild throb pulsed through the rider — a thing which in all his life he had never felt before; and he set his horse upon its haunches, as if he were heading something off. He gripped the handle and dropped the great length of his whip, and trailing it upon the ground, he turned proudly in a circle, and went charging back.

The wind had changed and was soughing toward the great swirl of heat, and the tasselled grass-stems, pointing backward now, jabbed at him as if they would resist his retreating rush.

He could barely see the Flint Creek fringe of trees as he looked out west, but the sun, like a large, round blotch of blood, was setting into it, its lower margin was blurred with the brushy stripes. He was thinking of *her* now — rapidly thinking hot, awful things, but the old reminder

of how he had often wished her good-will upon that fiery disk came back, and his heart softened till he wondered if hers were streaming toward him in that dim sky stripe above there, or —

My God! it might be abiding back there with that walker, in that lane of swaying straw!

He wheeled his horse, and the warm wind, turned again, blew back from his brow his gray slouched hat, and cooled the sweat upon his forehead, till a wild sane thrill of his old self surged in him, and a throb of happiness which he had not known for days filled him as he sped. On! on! the great black pall above him, the red fangs of the flame snarling on the southern slope. On! his spurs set, his body bent, the great grass insucked by his speed, reaching and swishing after him as if it stretched itself in prayer and pointed — on!

On! the hurrying hoofs beating a drumming rhythm to the sub-bass of the great growl on his right. On!

“Hy, there! I say! Hy, there!”

No answering turn. Just a gray bunch wavering through the swirl, now lost, now seen, now blending into the grayer road.

"Hoo-wee! Hy, there!"

But the thundering hoof-strokes only answered back as they rushed.

"Hy, there! Say!"

The walking figure turned, looked at the horseman, knew him, stared, and strode away.

"Come back, man. That's death!"

"You let me alone. I don't care if it were *hell*, its hell anyway, and —"

But there was a little rattle of a stirrup and the horse was across the road before the walker.

"Come, get up on here quick! Give me your hand, step on my foot there. Spring behind. Don't you hear that roar?"

And a tall figure was reaching kindly down.

"Get out of my way, you, — you've been in my way too much. I'd rather die in that," motioning, "and parch my bones, than let *you* help me live!"

But a strong hand had grabbed him, struggling, and lifted him. Then the girth broke, and both men fell into the road. They arose and glared at each other, the taller thinking fast and hearing the crackling grass—the faithful horse standing still.

"It's too late for that now, but —" and he gathered the whip-stock, slung at his wrist, and struck the patient horse a cruel slash.

As the beast sped snorting off, his owner snatched a rain-coat loose from the fallen saddle, breaking the string, and said :—

"Now come with me, or I'll stun you and drag you along!"

And he thought of another awful time when almost at this spot he had struck to save.

"Run!"

And through the tall grass northward they ran, hand in hand like two boys at their play, with the great hungry tongues of flame lapping about behind them, leaping onward, and hurling a battery of fiery wisps around—and even ahead.

"Run!"

Down a little swale they sped, the great smoke-cloud dropping a shower of burning stems upon their hats, and sprinkling their way with sparkling brands.

"Run!"

A grouse fluttered; a hare crouched hopelessly and trembled; a deer dashed by and disappeared.

On the two sped with the freshly ignited spots forming at their feet and some breaking out farther ahead.

“Here! here! Lie down here!”

And the rain-coat spread and flared in the sweeping wind.

“Never! Do you think I’d deprive you of—”

But in the crackle of the grasses the smaller man felt his feet tripped from under him, with a giant’s stroke—felt his body rolled into a little ditch, felt a smothering something over him and a great depressing weight fall on him, and then he heard an awful roar, as if a giant flying demon swooped and howled above his head.

He scarcely knew how long he lay there, but when he struggled up for want of breath, he felt a great limp length of something roll off of him, and he saw it lie quiet on the blight of smudge.

He sprang to his feet—all the man in him again, the demoniac gone.

“Hickman! Hickman! Wake up, man! Wake up!”

Lord! if he had some water!

He looked about. The draw seemed deeper farther on. He ran down it. A deer track had cut where the soil was soft. The singed

hummocks of sedge and grass were greener as he ran, and he hoped. He bounded farther through the smoking mouse nests and gopher runs, and there the sod had broken, the swale had changed into a wash, and over the bank was a little stagnant pool!

He leaped to it, filled his hat, and ran back, knowing now that it was this place which Bent had hoped to reach.

"Hickman! Hickman! Wake up! Here's some water! Wake, man, wake! My God!"

And as he swept his wet hand over the death-like face, a great blanket of skin and flesh rolled up from one cheek.

"My God, look at that!"

Bent roused a little under the terrible smart, and appeared to breathe. Later he sat up, but was confused and weak. As it began to darken, he seemed to know De Lorne (who sat yet and chafed his hands), and said half-stupidly:—

"I thought you were over at the Ditmers'."

"No, I left. Would to God that I had never been!"

"Ah, I remember now! Don and I came back to save you—save you for *her*, I think. Do you know what became of Don?"

XXXV

“But one face had not yet come.”

AT home Bent lay in that little room, upon that bed where no other form had been stretched since that sacred one had stiffened there. The doctor had said that he must be kept quiet and as far as possible from all domestic noise; and they put him here.

The farmer lay feverish and suffering, and the student sat near, without the smell of smoke upon his garments, ready to meet every want, while Aunt Mima often slid a kind face around the door-jamb in anxious solicitude.

The region had gone wild about the deed. Exaggerated accounts based upon Ralph's enthusiastic narrative, which was frank to the very bones of the whole matter, had flown here and there — gaining in wild interest as they went; and tender hands came about and helped, while rougher faces bent over the stockman and asked his needs.

But one face had not yet come.

One day, De Lorne had been watching the slow, painful turning of the patient's eyes—now that his fever was all gone and he was himself again—the turning at every new light step which came, the brightening at the rustle of every skirt.

“Hickman,” he said, “you are safe now. I would stay with you till you drove me off, but I think I had better go, that another comforter may come.”

And a very sickly smile spread over Ralph's face.

“It may be best, De Lorne. I hate to see you go. You have your work at college, though, I believe?”

The patient grimaced slightly as he turned his head, and the other answered that show of pain:—

“I was not worth it all, old boy. I tried to stop you, but—”

“But you did not know how a country boy could love. Don't worry; I would do it again to make her happy—even with you, and—”

But he stopped, and a tear slid and was absorbed into the bandage on the cheek.

"God help me! I did not know," the other said; "but now I know, and she knows—she always knew. She told me so—"

A quick wave of a strange face-light ran over the cheek uncovered, and broke itself in ripples about the unswollen eye. De Lorne hung his head a moment, but looked up.

"In some way you've made her sacred. I think now that if she were mine—which she is not in any way, I'd have you know—if she were mine to give, and I *knew* you as I *know* you, I could give her to you, just to—"

"Yes—yes, I know. I gave her up twice to you—nay, more. I looked in on her at college last spring—the night of the open session, and you two seemed so fit—I started away, and I've kept away this last week to give—"

"My God, Hickman! I was not worth all that!"

He arose and walked about.

Just then Uncle Dan drove up with the buggy which Ralph had asked for. The latter went to his room for something, and came back, in an evident attempt at being cool and easy.

"Good-by, old boy, I can never pay you; you did not save anything for her, you know, but—"

but — you've saved a trifle for — myself — saved me from myself. I don't care for my life — mere life — but I'm going to make something out of that fragment of manhood, Hickman. I'm a new creature since that baptism of fire with you. I can thank God truly that I've caught something of your spirit. I would not take worlds for the inspiration of your deed. Won't you tell her that when — when she comes?"

"Come! Who said that she was coming?"

"I say it. She'll come when I'm away. Let me at least give you that comfort. So far as she is concerned, I am out of the way forever, but — I'd — like to meet you, Hickman, and note your stature — sometime — somewhere again."

He turned his face away from that bandaged one, as he reached his hand; his step was in the hall — the buggy left the stiles — and he was gone.

XXXVI

"And again Dick stepped softly out — clicking the door-latch as he went."

OVER where the leaves were falling in the Flint Creek woods there was a heart almost as sore as the bandaged cheek out on the drab prairie waste — a heart burdened with the worry of waiting and seared with an anxious woe.

Would he understand? Would he ever understand? How could she spell it out to him?

She could not go there now. He might wrongly interpret her coming as an interest yet in De Lorne, and suffer more before she could explain. Then she did not want to meet De Lorne again. Her going would give double pain.

Early in the afternoon of the next day after De Lorne had left, she strolled out to a high place back westward on the farm, where she could look across out eastward over the house and the belt of trees, and note the swell and

sweep of the great upland plain. A little rain had fallen, and in the cleared air she could see the cluster of locust trees about Bent's home; and her heart bounded at this new outlook which she had never had before, and a greater longing came into her soul.

She walked home heavy-spirited; but as she went around the house Dick drove up to the stiles. She ran over them and up to him and fell weeping in his arms, as he stepped out.

• "Did — did you see him, Dick?"

"Yes — yes, I came by. He's better. Don't cry. He'll get well in time. He's just nervous now, and seems anxious; but — Here's a note to you — not from him, though, but —"

She tore it open with a snatch, while he still held his lines.

"Go to him," it said. "Go and stay that he may never suffer a moment again. I've seen his poor seared face turn for you at a woman's step in the hall. He has given you up to me twice or more. He looked in on you last open session — saw me near you and left you there — to me. He has stayed away this week that your choice might run free — even if that way were toward my unworthy self. I am

content. I understand. '*He is it*,' as you said, and he is more. I could never have climbed to his stature — [her brother saw the tears streaming now] but I'm going to climb some — thanks to you and him. I've been baptized with him and have risen in the newness of his image. God bless you both! Good-by!"

"Dick!" she screamed, her arms about his neck — "take me, take me to him, and" — as she climbed in the buggy, "drive, Dick, drive!"

The old circuit rider who preached at Prairie View church rode very leisurely down the long northern lane that afternoon — going to see the sufferer, said the neighbors, who looked out as he passed. After a while he jogged slowly back, and they ran out and asked how the patient was. "Oh, better! Much better, I think," he said, and then rode on.

In a certain little room where the low western sun was streaming, he had placed one hand upon a pillowed brow — watching that a bandage was not moved — and the other upon a long-haired head above a kneeling form just risen from the draperies of the bed. He had said some phrases, well known and trite, had

asked some pledges often asked before, and then he announced a condition as old as Eden, but new—ever new so long as life and love shall linger.

When he had ceased and gone, a lithe fair arm slipped beneath a scarred and brawny neck, and again a whisper sounded; and again Dick stepped softly out—clicking the door-latch as he went.

XXXVII

"The shadows in the pool."

AFTER Bent Hickman and Nannie Ditmer married, the realities were very instant; and the two set their faces and braced their hearts for whatsoever the future's obligations might bring on. For him at first there came a love much strengthened but less insistent—love doing, daring, sacrificing, in the harness of hope and self-denial; a love ofttimes misguided, but always love—a slave to toil for its idol's sake.

With her, there was love submissive, sitting with folded wings, sometimes soiled with the smudge of drudgery; love now groaning with the travail of all things born of patience, now exulting in new-found treasure-fields, bounding with new-found ecstasies; then again love waiting and commonplace, but always love.

In summer she shared her husband's anxiety about the floods and drouths, about the chinch-

bug's ravages and the cutworm's havoc; in the winter, the welfare of the stock, the garnering of the crop, the fluctuations of the market, and other fortunes and misfortunes about the farm filled her life. In all she was her husband's worthy helpmeet, but to her it seemed that, in comparison with his toil and worry, she sat with folded hands.

It was therefore with a surging pride, after a few years of such strife, that Nannie reached up her new-born boy into her husband's arms, as something substantial which she might give; and she said in peculiar prophecy, "*He* will help you, Bent!"

And therefore she gloried that the babe had cost her much!

Sometimes yet she sketched a little, but a new interest was in her heart, and the old inspiration was satisfied. When she showed these efforts to her husband, he said "Unh hunh!" and tossed the boy, or asked for something which he needed. He looked often into her face and smiled, but so frequently it seemed that he looked over her at something else beyond.

If, as they drove about the farm, she roused to her old interests, and asked him if the sheep

were not pretty as they grazed a-sprinkle upon the bluegrass slopes, or bunched themselves artistically in the shade, he would answer,—

“Yes, pretty fair-looking sheep, I reckon.”

When she said she was speaking of them in their setting, he replied that nobody had better pasture than theirs. If she said a broken, hilly view was pretty—as it often seemed after her days upon the flat plain,—he would reply:—

“Yes, but it don’t pasture much.”

So it ran; the raw realities were so importunate that need and dread threw their tangling snares over every flutter of sentiment or fancy.

Dick and Kate had been married also almost as long as Bent and Nannie; and when the women visited now, there was less said of Raphael and Chopin, and more of little Richard Ditmer Hickman or of little Nannie Hickman Ditmer, and of two rather ordinary men—not geniuses at least—out in the world battling for life and love.

The fingers of both mothers were stiffening, but the things for bettering and building were nimble and abiding still. When life is to be a battle, the accomplishments are flimsy things to fight it with. To idle talent they have a mis-

sion elevating and civilizing; to the brilliant genius they may be tools and weapons—heaven-sent; but to so many of us, who must work to live, they are the shadows in the pool.

XXXVIII

“‘God will give you the years,’ she said.”

IN the first few years of his married life, Bent had flourished with the impetus of his former prosperity.

One fall he bought cattle, many of them — straining not only his actual assets, but his credit as well. He sold them subsequently, however, at a large profit, and in the late winter was to deliver the herd at a certain point in Illinois.

He started with two helpers and his dog, and he made the long lanes red for many rods with the sleek Durhams and shorthorns, as in their slow pampered dignity they trod along.

He had crossed the river without loss and had gone well out into the neighboring state, congratulating himself upon his luck and the snug profit almost realized.

It chanced that another speculator, eager in his thrift, had driven up from Texas a herd of

lank-sided, long-horned, native steers; and the pretty market cattle dropped their noses and sniffed the tracks of their plebeian fellows as they followed the others' path a little way; then they turned off and went upon their own aristocratic route.

One forenoon Bent found a steer lagging; and its skin was welshed to keep it near the herd: but it dropped back farther still, and soon it was dead. In the afternoon another straggled, staggered, died; and in the lot where he fed that night he left half a dozen lifeless.

Then he knew!

Before him ran the news that the oncoming herd was tainted with Texas fever; and men closed their lots to him, drove their herds back from the road, and almost refused him feed and food. Determined groups met him here and there and turned him back, till he could steal out on some cross-road; and he and his helpers often herded the lessening flock night after night in the muddy lanes.

At last he reached his destination with a remnant, turned it into a secluded pasture, sent his helpers back with instructions to keep silent till he came, and waited himself, and watched with

a sort of fascination the daily decrease in his little herd. Finally the disease seemed to abate somewhat, and he started home—the buyer promising to send a check for such as should eventually prove sound; but this sum would be a mere pittance in comparison with what he had hoped to receive.

He started homeward again, riding horseback. Here and there he dropped Nannie a letter, punctuating his progress, so that she might guess the time of his arrival. He took another route—not the one he came—and heard hard things said of the man who had brought such havoc in the country, and he feared to tell his name. He also discovered the name of the other man who had driven up the Texas herd.

When he reached his own county town, he rode around its skirts, late in the afternoon, because he felt that, since his distress was so intense to himself, every one must know of his loss. At least they would ask about his success, which was as bad; for it was well known in trading circles that he had made thousands in his bargaining, and men envied him his good luck.

As he went on and saw the prairie spire sharp against the bank of bright clouds beyond, where

the sun was setting, he began to grow weak and unstrung from the tension of his terrible month of strain; and he drew his rein that he might not get home too soon, or be recognized in the light and be questioned by his neighbors.

As he came nearer to his house it seemed to him that he could not enter it. He could face everything which he had dodged in comparison with this. How could he confront the delight and sweet expectancy of her there in that home — his mother's home — which was not his now — if his creditors had their dues.

When he passed the church, and remembered the bounding of his heart there that time in the gratitude of her love, he thought of his own pledge of devotion, and his mother's radiant face. When he looked upon the very spot where he had set Nannie down from the buggy and had felt so rich in owning her heart and the very air about her — when he thought of his strong impulses for good that day, and the reward of bitterness which he was now reaping, his heart hardened, in spite of all these softening associations.

He looked to the left, and saw the sun sink, and throw out beneath the cloud a flash of

promise of the morrow's brightness ; and, as he glanced back at the church, behind him now, the windows seemed frames of flame. In a moment it all faded, and as the twilight threw a damp chill over him, he broke down and sobbed aloud—so loud that the faithful collie looked up at the queer noise that his master made, as if he asked what he must do—not knowing what order that was—having no training in driving away mad grief.

Bent lifted his head later in the dark and could not see his home—there was no light about it—and the thought came that fire might have destroyed that also since he started back. Ill luck is so persistent when it starts. But in a few moments he saw a lamp placed—he knew where—upon the table by a hand, he knew whose ; and in spite of his rebellious mood, he thanked God that his house was there still, and that hand, which had so often thus signalled to him its safety far out over the prairie gloom and heralded his welcome in the old prairie custom, was strong enough to do it still. He had not heard from her since he started home, and it had been weeks since he had seen her—and such weeks !

When he rode to the stable to put up his tired horse, he put out his hand in the proper stall and knew by the feel and the manner in which it shrank from him that a strange animal, not one of his own, was there. Then he found another place for his, and went toward the house. Before his steps had sounded thrice upon the back porch, a door flew open, then there was a little scream of joy, a pair of arms were about his neck, and another short dumpy pair was stretching up past golden curls toward him.

"Are you all well?" he asked, choking.

"Yes," she said, as she drew him into the lighted dining room. He picked the boy up and turned away from her as he hugged him; then he set the child down.

"Why, Bent, you've been sick! What's the matter? Tell me!"

But he only grew more ashen and ghostly for an instant, and fell into a chair beside the table, and dropping his arms upon an overturned plate, he shook throughout his whole body in his grief.

"*Have* you been sick, Bent?" she repeated, and she slid an arm over his neck.

"Yes — yes, but not as you mean."

"Didn't the man pay you for the cattle?" — a dread she had always felt.

He arose and looked at her till the blood surged back into his face, and it seemed that his veins might burst in his effort at repression — in trying to be cool. Then he said, calmly : —

"There was almost nothing to pay for!"

"Why — what —?"

"Nannie, they died on the way — took Texas fever from a Texas herd; and I saw the lanes and lots for miles, day after day, strewn with our home and farms — our little all. It seemed to me that your clothing and the bread from the baby's mouth dropped and rotted by the way; that the effort of my life, the pride of all my toiling, the inspiration which sustained me while I waited for you, were all gone."

He looked up, and both began to tremble, and they stood silent for minutes in their distress. She recovered from the blow first, gulped something a time or two, and said : —

"Bent, I'm sorry. It's a poor thing to say; and I'm not going to say the old tame thing that you have the boy and me yet. I do not put such an estimate upon myself, and you say

the boy is timid and will never like stock. Perhaps you are right, but he is something to love and live for, and — *you don't know.*”

He had risen now, and was again beyond the table, walking up and down the room.

“Bent, you have yourself left — your better self yet, and — and — I know that you have the same inspiration — your love for m — for us; and that can do — will do — what it has done.”

“But, oh, the years of it — the years of it,” he wailed. “If I had back just the years of it!”

“God will give you the years,” she said.

“But they have gone.”

“He will give you better ones.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I believe it.”

And he went around the table, and drew her to his knee.

“Bent, when you asked for me, God gave me to you, didn't he? and now —”

“Hush!” he said.

It seemed to her that she never saw the drawn eye and shrivelled cheek seem sadder, or the other side of his face cloud quite so awfully.

"God gave me *that*," pointing to the scar, he said — "THAT — when you were already mine — always mine — THAT to save him for *this*."

She had no words for this terrible mood.

"God gave me these herds and farms, now gone, gave them as the reward of my toil, and sent again this cursed cur across my path to blast my life!"

Her lips were parted, but she could not speak. The scar upon his cheek glowed as if it had just received a blow.

"The man," he went on, "who drove that Texas herd was Ralph De Lorne, and I — I — could —"

"Hush!" she said, putting her hand upon his mouth. "He's in the other room!"

He threw her from his knee and sprang up, but she was before him, pushing, pleading, and praying in his face.

"He is our guest," she said. "Sit down. You do not know. He is my friend and yours. You saved him once for me. He came to ask you to save him again — not knowing. He did not ask it then, nor did I, but can't you just *spare* him now? Why, Bent, you are not yourself. You —"

But just then the door opened and De Lorne appeared.

"I do not blame you, Hickman. Do with me as you wish. I am a curse, a blight, to all. I did not know that I had ruined you in ruining others and myself. I am a pauper and worse. My cattle died because men refused me feed, and even an abiding-place. I could not sell — could not go on. The death of your herd published what mine would do, and men met me and turned me back. I did not then know that it was you whom I had ruined, and who, innocently, had ruined me. I could not starve. I was afraid I might be hung. I left and went home without a cent.

"You want to know why I am in your house to-night. I have a brother at home. He was interested with me in this herd — put his money in at my suggestion. I did not see how we could lose. He is young and social. Feeling that he could soon pay back, he used his employer's means for his needs; now he cannot pay and I can't help him!" He hesitated a moment to subdue a sob.

"I had no friend of whom I might ask, though friends were plenty when I was rich. To save

my brother from a felon's fate, I came to you, knowing your kind heart, and, as I thought, your plenty, and not knowing that I had also ruined you! Good-by," he said, closing the door gently as the couple hung their heads, stupefied. "May God let me even things in some way some day!"

And they heard him go out the front way — out before supper was spread — out, hopeless and sad. Nannie arose and bade Uncle Dan to help the gentleman with his horse, because just now she felt it best to speed silently the parting guest. Bent sat with his face buried in his hands till the little boy, creeping up, pulled them apart, and said, "Peep!" Then the man in him sprang. He was on his feet, ran out front, listened — sped on to the stiles and shouted. But only the steady thump of a horse's lope sounded far away up the lane.

XXXIX

“‘I’ve some old-fashioned notions about honesty,’ Bent replied.”

WHEN he went back into the house, things were too awful to talk about, so they ate in silence and soon retired. For a few days he was very busy, and it was almost a week before he went to town. At once he called on Dick about drawing up the deeds making his farms over to his creditors. For a while the lawyer would not hear of such a thing. “Let’s fight them awhile in the courts, Bent. We can’t beat them outright, I fear, but we can get a good compromise, and —”

“I’ve some old-fashioned notions about honesty,” Bent replied. “If you want to help me with these deeds, you’ll find the numbers in those tax receipts,” throwing them down.

“But, Bent, why not get them to wait on you? Why not stay upon the farms? They can’t dispossess you for this year, you know.

Then you might buy them on time, and you can pay for them. I can arrange that for you, and — ”

“I had a mortgage once. I don’t want another. I want to pay out all I’m worth right now. I’ll pay the rest when I can; but I want to begin life anew in a new place.”

“Well, then, I’ll make out the deeds. Call in about an hour and sign them.”

And Bent went out, and Dick ran his hands through his hair and thought a little — thought of his sister at home and that pretty boy of hers — named after him. And when Dick Ditmer thought, some scheme was usually evolved.

Bent came back in a short while, and Dick took his acknowledgment to the deeds, and, picking them up, he shoved them into a pigeon-hole, and looked very carelessly up into Bent’s wondering face.

“Leave them here with me, Bent. My clerk wrote them, I’ve had no time to look over them. They can’t be delivered, anyway, till Nannie’s acknowledgment is taken — her dower, you know. You go home, don’t say anything about this — you haven’t said anything about it, have you ?”

"No."

"Well, you go home now, when it suits you — and — let's see, — to-morrow I'll be busy — well, let's say next day — I'll come out and take Nannie's acknowledgment, and if you want to, we can come in together after dinner. I'll be out early. Will that suit?"

"Yeh-es," said Bent, hoping to have it over sooner. He had forgotten about Nannie's dower, and he wanted to give a title that was good.

When he went home, he asked her if she would sign the deeds and go out into the world with him, almost a pauper.

"Why, it's never been mine, Bent — always just yours. Do what you will with it — if doing that is doing right."

The next day Dick took those deeds around to the creditors — two sordid money-lenders of his town — and told them of the calamity and Bent's intention. He called their attention to the signature as it stood *alone* upon them, and hinted dark things about Nannie's dower being withheld.

After estimating the total of the farms at Bent's valuation of them, there was quite a

margin of debt left yet — enough to take away his little bank-stock, and some of his other stock — breaking up his teams. But Dick said the dower was worth this and more, and held out to them the advantage of a title which was clear. He magnified the importance of a stubborn woman's interest, which no judgment against Bent could ever touch. If they would release Hickman from all obligations, he would guarantee that the dower could be obtained, but if they did not, he would "law" them till doomsday.

And they knew what it meant when Dick Ditmer "lawed."

He told them the land was worth more, anyway, than they had figured it at — that land was "rising" every day (which was a fact) — a few more dollars per acre would pay all out, and the rent would pay the interest. If they would give him a written proposition to give up Bent Hickman's notes, — an acknowledgment of a receipt in full, *he* could go out and get his sister's dower — at least he hoped he could.

And though they hummed and hawed and consulted — the bird in the hand fluttered, and they signed.

Next day Dick rode out to Bent's early — for

he feared the impatient stockman might come to town.

"Oh, Dick," said Nannie, "isn't it 'too bad! If Bent just had a little start—a little cash, you know, he would soon be on his feet. But I know he will never borrow again."

Poor girl! things do not look so rosy, when the realities of poverty rise up gaunt into our more sober deliberations. The sentiment and poetry of the situation had largely gone.

"Well, he's going to have a little left," said Dick, just as Bent came in from the barn.

"After I sell my bank-stock?" said Bent, rather eagerly.

"Before you sell your bank-stock or any other stock," said Dick.

"Why, how do you make that out?"

"By valuing your land higher than you did." And he mentioned the sum.

"But it won't sell for that."

"But it will."

"But I say it won't. I ought to know."

"And I say it will and I ought to know. *I've* sold it for that. If you don't think it, I'll take it for that, durn your old stubborn hide. Read this!"

And Nannie snatched up the paper, and read:—"For and in consideration of a deed from Thomas B. Hickman and wife to certain lands known as [here followed the numbers], we agree to release said Hickman from all indebtedness to us, amounting to —— thousand dollars, and to deliver to him his two promissory notes of [here followed dates, amounts, etc.]."

And this was signed by his two creditors.

"But — but," said Bent, rising.

"There are no 'buts' about it. Nannie acknowledges her dower. I go back to town — give up these deeds, and your notes are in my hands when you want them."

"But are my debts paid — honestly paid — are they?"

"Of course they are. You have bought your notes with your deeds, or I have rather. Those notes are mine if you give me these deeds, and I shall give them to you. When you have your notes, how can you owe anything?"

And Bent gave a sigh of relief, as if he yielded — a little unwillingly, however.

But Dick continued: "The margin of increase in value will more than pay any difference or deficit you may feel squeamish about

now, and the rent will pay the interest. Land is rising. They will make money off of the bargain yet. You are a free man — ”

“Ah, Dick!” said Nannie, rising threateningly.

“Hold a moment, sis. You have a little surplus,” still addressing Bent, “and I have more than I deserve. I’ll lend you all you need besides that, on your plain note of hand, Bent Hickman, because I owe you, and I believe you an honest man.”

“No, no, my luck has failed. I’ll never borrow again.”

“Then I’ll go partners with you—pit my capital and legal advice against your experience—and we’ll whack up—but here’s Sis with her shower-bath.”

And he returned her caresses, and smiled to himself to think that yesterday he was making her out such a terror with her legal rights—a stubborn woman—the first time in his life he had ever said a hard word about his sister.

“But I’m in this, too,” she said, smiling past her tears, and telling Dick to be quieter and not wake the boy—whereas she had been making all the noise herself.

"Yes, Nannie's in it," said Bent, solemnly.

"That's good!" said the lawyer. "I'll advance her all she needs on father's estate. She can then feel it is really hers, as it will be too soon, I fear—poor old father," and he broke down himself in his softened mood and reached for Nannie's hand. Presently his face came up.

"Let's see," he said, "Hickman, Ditmer, and Hickman? No, that will not do—to separate man and wife that way. Hickman, Hickman, and Ditmer. I'm the party of the third part, you know."

"Too much Hickman," said Bent, smiling a little.

"Hickman and Ditmer, then," said Dick.

"Aren't there too many Hickmans yet?" said Nannie.

"Well, then, I'll put in a thousand for Kate," Dick said. "Look out now, old fellow! You never sailed with quite so many sheets in the wind."

When Bent went out to put up Dick's horse, he thought of that other steed which had shrunk from his touch that night, and whose hoof-patter he had heard growing fainter and fainter up the lane.

XL

“‘It is herd for herd. Let us never cross each other’s paths again.’”

It was March the first—that notable time in the rural regions of the West when cropping contracts are dated. Bent Hickman had rented the Lambert farm near town, and had begun to prepare to move to it.

The day on which he stacked his furniture in the wagons of his neighbors, who had kindly offered aid, was a wild one. The great winds went shrieking over the prairie and sighed through the open doors and windows till a wail seemed to sigh about the old home at the loss of a long-loved tenantry. The hardest thing to leave was that little room.

For some time they were busy arranging the new home, and this and the labor preparing for the spring cropping shut out sorer and soberer things.

When he looked at his wife, toiling and

patient, he felt his poverty hampering him, especially that he could not buy for her all she needed; and his heart smote him that he had not done more for her when he could. If he mentioned it she only kissed him, and merged her nature closer into his, and ran the daily routine of her life along the narrow channel of further care and toil.

She saw that this was worrying him. One day she said:—

“Why, Bent, I would not be cast down; I don’t care for that. Do you know that I often rejoice in our new start because of what it does for me?”

He looked up surprised, half smiling.

“After we were first married, I used to feel that I was such a cipher,” she went on. “My little accomplishments which had worried you so much as something above you, what are they now in this great battle? What have I ever done to help you? You had your home, your herds, your money, your everything to my hand when I came. I stepped in and—and—hung some pictures on the wall.

“Why, I have so often wished that from the beginning I might have put my effort, my thrift

and self-denial, along with yours — might have had an interest in your herds and fields beyond the dower of the law. Now we are partners indeed.

“I know you feel that I have done my part, yet I’ve had Aunt Mima and the girls — all the help I need ; but Uncle Dan has not always lifted the burdens from your back — the burdens of responsibility which no hired help *can* lift. Oh, I have so often wished that I could lift.”

“You can and have, God bless you,” he said. “I’m a rich man, though a pauper.”

And he arose and went to town, and when he got the check out of the post-office, for the remnant of his herd, he thought again of that boy who might find a felon’s cell, and he wrote his name across the back, and enclosed it to Ralph De Lorne. Lower down he wrote in his close-fisted farmer’s hand : —

“This is all I had left from my flock. I send it to you. It is herd for herd. Go your way. Never mention this, but use it. Let us never cross each other’s paths again.”

As the years went on at first, the crops failed, the hog cholera came, prices swept low,

and Bent's little increments of gain would scarcely pay Dick's interests, not to think of any further dividend.

As the boy grew he became a source of unhappiness — not discord, between his parents — the only one that had yet come. He had no taste for stock or farm — no knowledge of or desire for thrift. He was sweet-tempered, bright, obedient to his father's will — the obedience of all things but interest; and he was his mother's willing slave. He liked books and finer things, was a stroller — often alone.

She had wanted to call him "Benton" at his birth, but the father would have none of that, saying that every boy deserved a name of his own. He would no more give that babe his old name than his old coat now; yet he would very gladly have saddled on him here almost in babyhood his old business, which fitted the child so poorly.

So Nannie had called him "Ditmer."

Later, as a little surplus began to come, Bent bought the Lambert farm on which he lived, and by judicious skimping and trading was about to pay for it. But it cost him more than means and toil. It had narrowed his life almost into a

line, and he had scarcely got this paid for and a little surplus ahead before another burning desire was upon him.

The man who lived upon his mother's farm was a Mr. Judkins, a son of one of Bent's former creditors. The old man had died not half so wealthy as reputed. The lands increased in value as Dick had predicted, a value which once had covered all the obligation, but now they were depreciated again and their worth was below the debt.

When this son saw Hickman flourishing, he had sued him for fraudulent representation, but Dick had thrown the case contemptuously out of court.

Then Bent tried to buy the old home, but the owner would not sell to him, or to any one else unless they pledged themselves not to part with it for a term of years.

XLI

“ ‘Durn your compromise.’ ”

“ BENT,” said Dick one day, in town, “you’d like the old farm again, wouldn’t you? Well, you really never deeded it away.”

“How’s that?”

“Why, my clerk, in copying the numbers, unintentionally made a mistake, and I never noticed it. You deeded land six miles away—wrong township or range—don’t remember which now—land you did not own. The true title to the old farm is in you yet.”

“But I meant to deed it!”

“Yes, but I thought now that you wanted it back, and he’s so stubborn, that if you would—”

“Hold!” said Bent, and there was something in the manner which made Dick “hold.”

“I got my note, didn’t I?”

“Yes.”

“And he didn’t get the land?”

“No.”

"Well! How is that fixed up?"

"Oh, a deed of correction will fix it, but you might get a good compromise, and perhaps the place by paying a smaller sum than —

"Durn your compromise."

"Well, at least he sued you, and that cost you a little — specially if I had charged —"

"Can you write a deed of correction?"

"Yes — but —"

"Well, *write* it. I know the numbers." And he spoke them, as Dick copied.

"Had Nannie got down to your house when you left?" (Nannie had come in early "trading" that day — trading eggs, butter, etc., for things needed.)

"No," said Dick. "Guess she is there by this time."

"Well, I'll go get her."

"I can go down there. She'll be there at dinner."

"No, you don't! You've tried to put the devil into *me* once to-day, Dick Ditmer, and I'm going to save your sister from you. Don't you ever do it again. Write out that deed. I'll wait for it."

And he sat there, read it over, saw it was

right this time, and, after acknowledging his own signature before Dick, to save a half-dollar, he went out and got another notary to take Nannie's.

And Dick Ditmer put his heels upon his desk and twisted a gray mustache, and had not felt so humbled since that night his gun had gone off against the wall.

The next morning Bent rode over to see Judkins. The husband was in town excited at the prospect of another lawsuit with "that d—d Ditmer" before he could clear the title.

The wife, who was once that old Methodist flame of Dick's in his struggling days, but was now red-eyed and slatternly, met Hickman at the door.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Judkins. Is Mr. Judkins in?"

"No, sir," her jaw set forward a little. He had evidently come to see about the farm, she thought, and she could have bitten him.

"Is he around the farm anywhere?"

"He is not."

"I'm sorry. I —"

"Wanted to get it away from him, didn't you?"

“No. I heard, just yesterday, that I had not made my deed right to his father, and —”

“Yes, very nice arrangement, wasn’t it? Slick!”

“No, I knew nothing of it!”

“How about Mr. Ditmer?”

“No one knew till your abstract was made.”

“Indeed?”

“But I’ve had it all fixed up. Here is a new deed. I always intended to sell this land fairly.”

And she reached for the paper, and held it, opening the door wider.

He was turning away.

“Won’t you come in, Mr. Hickman?”

“I should like to peep a moment into that little room off there, if you will let me. It was my mother’s. She died there.”

And she led the way, and saw his solemn face as he came out, and found tears on her own in all the conflicting emotions which she felt as he left. When he climbed the steps at the stiles, she called to him, and, throwing a shawl over her head, seeming more sloven now than ever, ran after him; and her face was shrivelled into a painful prayer, almost, as she said:—

"Mr. Hickman, I — I — think we have been unjust and unkind to you. I thought you hard and narrow. I did not know. I'm sure my husband does not know you. I'm sorry. You seem so kind, can't I ask a favor of you? *Buy* this place of us, won't you? and save us from this humiliation of borrowing. I do so want to go back to town, and it would free my husband from debt."

"Yes, I'll buy it, if Mr. Judkins will come over and offer to sell it — right."

"What will you give for it?" she said, her face so eager.

And then there came to Bent Hickman without any one's suggestiveness — came at the invitation of his own niggardliness, a narrow impulse. He knew now that if Judkins came to him, the fellow would come in his gratitude, his humility, his distress, and need; and the price could be beaten down to a low figure. He turned to say to her that he would wait till he saw her husband, but, as he looked at her, he saw beyond her the window of that little room, looking out frankly at the sun, as if it were the eye of an honest soul; and his heart said, "How much," and his stingy head, calculating, said, "How little."

"Land's gone down," said an evil suggestion.

"Yes," replied a better impulse, "about as low as when I sold it."

"And the place has gone to rack," came from the former source.

"Yes, the fellow had nothing to keep it up with."

"And—" began another suggestion, but he looked the waiting, hoping woman in the face, and said resolutely:—

"I will give you a thousand dollars more than it cost you!"

She grabbed his hand, and he felt a queer sensation that this should happen from any other man's wife but Dick's; and a thrill came—a thrill which he would not have taken *two* thousand dollars for, that in getting back his old home, he had cast out the haunting doubt about the margin of his debts, and had paid them better in buying it than in selling.

The next morning Judkins came over, of course, gladly accepting so good an offer, not only bringing with him his gratitude, but making Bent deduct the costs which the foolish suit had caused.

XLII

“‘Please let me help you.’ And the check was given there.”

MANY years younger than the boy, a little daughter was born. As the son grew on and disappointed his father's hopes, this girl ran about the farm with the toiling man, when the weather was fit, cheering him at his work.

The mother watched and knew — knew their congeniality, and she spared the little one from the house that her husband might be comforted. In some way she had a faint hope of compensating for what the father regarded as defects in the boy.

All through his hard life this little girl had held her father saner, safer, better by her love, and sometimes by a childish rebuke which smote the stubborn rockiness of his heart till it gushed in great impulses and good deeds.

With these this chronicle cannot concern itself, except to say that Bent Hickman learned to yield his intuitions to her, not daring often to

reason, and knowing that deliberation was not always for his bettering. Shrinking as he was, he was conscious of the process at times, and he liked to take the child by the hand or have her arms about his neck, and then rise with a great bound to the surface, and feel the fresh air of better things whistle into his lungs, as it had that day when he had dived for her mother.

All along his life he had hoped that there would come a time when he need not delve and toil — when he could stay up higher and develop into all he had ever hoped. But it had not yet come.

“I’m like a poor clock,” he said to himself one day, “I have been often set right, but I don’t seem to run right somehow.”

When Ditmer’s bills came in from college, — where by hard begging his mother had succeeded in getting him at last, Bent resented the expenditures, as he thought how, through all these years, this boy had not earned a cent, while, at this age, he himself had paid off the debt from his mother’s farm.

In the vacations, when the boy was at home and his father was strained at work, Ditmer was useless about the farm, because he was not

strong, and was not inured to toil and the summer heat; neither did he mitigate his father's contempt by any further show of interest in the farm work.

In the last year at school Ditmer wrote home that he had joined the church—his mother's church. As she read the letter her eyes swam with gratitude; but Bent said that the move did not amount to much, since the boy had never had energy enough to do anything wrong anyway. But the mother trusted.

Sometimes visions of De Lorne and what he might have been under certain influences came floating up in mystic suggestiveness—of the impress he had made, or might have made, upon her own life; and she wondered if these tendencies of her soul might not have cropped out in her boy. Oh, if he should have these and his father's integrity and firmness!

And in her fancy, she built a man after all her own heart had ever known or sighed for—set up an idol of her hopes and walled it in with prayers.

A session later, when Ditmer was about to be graduated, he wrote home that he had determined to preach the gospel as he saw it; and

he asked if his father would furnish means for him to go on to Bethany College, Virginia, to prepare.

Nannie's heart bounded at this, but Bent's cup of disappointment was brimmed. He had not ceased to hope that the boy might come his way, and be practical and utilitarian yet. So he refused outright to furnish money for such a scheme, and wrote Ditmer that, since the latter was his own man now, he must go out into the world and fight a little for a dollar till he saw how one was made.

And the son's heart was smitten, but he did not give up his hope.

At the old college, climbing ambitiously, was another boy, younger than Nannie's son. His parents had called him Frank, and his face was as open as his name. When Ditmer and other friends slapped his shoulder to see his bright face turn and smile, they simply said "De Lorne."

These two were friends in all that a college comradeship can mean; but the stronger fibre of the bond was rather in the younger man.

"Hickman," said Frank, a few days before

the school closed, "my father comes to-morrow. He wants to see you, and I want you to see him. He wrote me that he knew your mother when she was here at school."

"I like my mother's friends," the other said.

"I've told him about you and your ambitions, and he is interested."

The next day a yet handsome man with gray in his hair and beard came, and the old-time friends still living in the college town called him "Ralph."

"My boy tells me," he said, as he held Ditmer's hand, "that you wish to go farther on to college, and that your father feels that he cannot spare the means. I am indebted to him more than I can ever pay, and he has pledged me never to mention my obligation to him; but he never said a word about my not paying his son. Please let me help you."

And the check was given to the young man then and there.

XLIII

“And he hardened and fretted on.”

WHEN Bent Hickman learned that his plans for his son's life were thwarted, and by whom this had been brought about, he stormed a little as he never had before, and made it so disagreeable for Ditmer that the boy could not well stay at home, but spent much time at his Uncle Dick's.

Why should this man, thought Bent, come again and blast his prospects? and he ground his teeth in hate when he recalled all that Ralph De Lorne had made him suffer.

It was therefore with real pleasure that he heard that a recent speculation had reduced De Lorne from affluence to poverty again, and that he was seeking employment anywhere to supply his needs.

Sometimes, while his acres were broadening monthly, his herds grazing farther and farther away from the central home, the farmer went in and growled to Dick about his troubles as he

soured on. But Dick had little sympathy with his sordidness, and liked De Lorne for what he had done.

"The matter with you, Bent," Dick said one day, "is that you've not headed right as you've grown. You are nothing but a darned old collard, tall and green, not come to anything at the top. You are rooted right, but you are allowing yourself to be cut green, and are pickling yourself in acid before you ripen. The only kind of head you'll come to will be a 'sore-head,' if you don't sweeten a little. Stop gall-ing! God has blessed few men as He has blessed you."

Bent knew that Dick was not a preacher, but he had heard few sermons that ever hit him harder than that. Between him and his wife a sort of clammy thing had crept—a thing which never voiced itself or seemed tangible, but was felt as a raw, damp east wind blows on the face.

Ditmer had gone out of her life for a while, and Laura, going to school in town and boarding at Aunt Kate's—was out of his.

Nannie toiled and hoped, and Bent fumed and moped and soured on, growing arrogant

in his success; and, though hale yet in his higher middle age, he seemed old and unnecessarily dictatorial in his crabbedness and self-will.

Time wore on. As womanhood came to Laura she was in every way attractive. She was independent yet respectful, and had a blending of her mother's tenderness, her father's force and integrity, and her uncle's sprightly disposition.

The daughter usually came out home Friday afternoons—the father went in for her, unless the weather was very bad, and he took her in again on Monday mornings. Their old congeniality grew, and the farmer was softening a little under these weekly double rides. But now a new anxiety began to rise.

Many of the country lads, pleased with the girl's beauty, and her prospects perhaps, tied their horses Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons to the Hickman hitching rack with considerable regularity. At first this disconcerted Bent very much, but then he reasoned with his heart that he must expect it in time, and he began to prepare himself for the worst—or the best—of such an outlook.

Among those coming there were some who filled the father's eye — as well as any one with such intentions could — some who had business ability after the order of his own — who already had farms and flocks, and further prospects when the old folks died.

On one or two of these the daughter seemed to smile, and hopes rose in Hickman's breast that there might come to him by her marriage a son to whom he might resign his responsibilities — well, no, not *resign* — he wasn't of the resigning sort, he thought, — but one who, in his old age, might help him much.

So he set his heart to compass this, and felt a rebound into his old self at the outlook.

For a while after leaving college Hoyle had farmed, but a fever or pneumonia had broken the great fellow's giant strength, and early after marrying he had gone to the county town near which Bent lived, and had engaged in the business of general merchandise. Here he flourished. When he heard that Ralph De Lorne was in want, he wrote him a letter — enclosing something — and asked him if he would not like to come up and take charge of his books,

since the business had grown beyond his own capacities.

For a while De Lorne hesitated; but there was a wife in shabby dress and with faded cheek, and a boy whose ambitions to be a physician were cut short; and he came.

Perhaps Bent Hickman loved no man as he loved his boyhood playmate and manhood friend, Frank Hoyle, and still he reached his hand in hearty grip when they met; but he went not into Hoyle's store any more.

Sometimes he met De Lorne upon the street, but never saw him; and Ralph, respecting the other's mood, turned off or looked away when they approached each other.

Bent never spoke to Nannie of her friend, but she knew; and he hardened and fretted on.

XLIV

"A strong heart was battling, but had not won."

ONE evening, at some social, when Frank De Lorne was home on a vacation from his medical school—a young man now with his first real outlook into life—he was introduced to Laura Hickman, now in her junior year in the local college which had recently been founded in the town.

"Why, you are Ditmer Hickman's sister," he said, still holding to her hand.

"And you are his friend Frank—Frank De Lorne of whom he speaks so kindly."

And she gave him an extra grip with a warm vibration of her arm.

A few commonplaces showed to each that a very interesting person had been encountered and that each might tarry here awhile—and enjoy the occasion. Another meeting or two incidentally—a purposeful visit or so at Uncle Dick's, and the deed of love was done in that

old inexplicable way in which these things so often happen.

Then these meetings occurred more frequently along her senior year. But her folks knew nothing of them yet.

Her college life was done. She was at home again — at home to stay how long? the joy of her father's days. Her old-time interest in the beauty of the flocks and in the things which were absorbing him took a new hold on his heart, and he felt himself bounding a little now and breathing better again. Sometimes she grabbed his arm as he started out, locked both her own in his elbow's bend, and walked about with him; sometimes they rode joltingly from farm to farm in the old way on the rude spring seat. He pointed out this rich sweep and that, saying that it would all be largely hers some day. Then her heart would sink as she knew that he was thinking bitterly of her brother now.

One day they rode to a distant place — the old farm of his youth, — and they had shown each other depths of self which neither had ever known before. He had spoken of his boyhood

life, and a mood of confidence was upon them as they rode slowly home. She had so surprised him with her mature seriousness that he realized fully for the first time that she was a woman now and his little girl was gone. He thought how he had felt toward his boy, and he made a silent vow, as he rode, that he would respect—since he could respect—the wishes of this girl. Then he spoke to her of what must come to her, and how he had determined to give her up to some worthy man—some sterling fellow, who should come and seek and be a son indeed to him in his old age.

“Why, father, I’m already engaged to the noblest boy—”

“And you never told me!” he said.

They were nearing home. It was evening. Across the July fields the sea of corn, just tasseling, was unfolding its curled leaves from the day’s heat.

“I was going to, though—but—”

“But you feared your stern old father. God help me, I have not always been tender—but, I’m not so bad. Who is he? I could love him—”

“I do not think you know him, father. He is—”

He blanched and trembled slightly, and she could not go on.

"His name?" he said.

"It is Frank De Lorne!"

She expected some caution—perhaps some remonstrance, for she had seen her father's favor toward a neighbor boy. She had braced herself for this with pleading phrases. But he said not a thing.

They were at the gate which went into the farm, and he asked her, not unkindly, in a husky voice, to get out and walk home—saying that he wished to drive on down the road a little way. He stopped and she crept out. She halted once as she stepped, and looked beseechingly in his face, but it seemed to her that there was nothing of it but a red scar, burning hot, with a hard white setting around its borders. When he heard the rustle of her skirts as she lit on the ground, he struck the team a blow or so, and was gone.

"Father!" she cried, but he did not turn.

As the girl walked homeward down the hedge, there was something more awful in all this than there could be in any rebuking words. It was a rebuke which she could not answer.

As the thrashers, flitting, scolded her, and the little hares scampered before her in the dusty path, it seemed someway that all the things which she had loved, out here on the old place, turned from her as the world grew dark.

When she reached home she went crying into her mother's arms and told her all; but Nannie fell to weeping with her, and had no word of comfort for her except the little soothing things which one utters to a sobbing child.

"Mother! what does it mean?"

"Wait, and you shall know!"

Hour after hour a team drove down the road and turned when no man watched and drove up. Up and down while the sun was sinking—up and down when all was shadow—up and down as the stars came out and the deep summer sultriness stirred not a leaf. A strong heart was battling, but had not won.

At length the wagon rattled down the hedge now and was at home. Nothing was said at supper—the breakfast was a silent meal between man and wife even—the daughter not being present. The day was one of dreary expectation and dread; and so were other days.

The strain was very great. Any trifle might bring an explosion.

At last the gaunt spectre was nearly maddening Nannie, and she approached her daughter in a sort of remonstrance — a limp attempt at persuasion to change her mind.

“Mother, you married the man you loved, didn’t you?”

“Yes, dear, but your father was a very worthy man.”

“Well, how do you know that Frank is not worthy?”

“But he has not been a success yet.”

“Did you marry father because he was a success? Was your waiting timed so that you might be sure about it?”

“No, oh, no!”

“I once heard you say that you loved him most at the time of his failure. Did you?”

“Yes.”

“He was the only man you ever loved, wasn’t he, mother?”

“Yeh — es, dear.”

“And Frank is the only man *I* ever loved.”

“But you may love another yet, dear.”

“Mother, I heard you say, — once when

I was a little girl — so little that you thought I did not understand, and I did not *then*, but I remembered till I could understand, — heard you tell Aunt Kate that yours had been an instinctive love — and that you believed in it. Didn't you?"

"Yeh — es."

"Well, I'm instinctively in love too. No man ever affected me as Frank De Lorne."

"But, dear —"

"Didn't another man try to win you, mother? Aunt Kate says so. She told his name, but I forget it. She said that, although he was very fascinating and fairly worthy, your love for father held. Did it, mother?"

"Yes, yes; but you are so young."

"How old were you, mother, when you first loved father?"

"Only a babe, they say. Only a babe."

And her own life baffled her at every turn.

XLV

“ So many sore, silent places in their lives.”

DITMER had gone through his theological course, and had come home. His father's treatment was such that again the boy was not much about the farm. He preached here and there at country churches as he could, was considered bright and promising, and, as his advances came, he stopped by home to tell his mother and to see her face light and receive her kiss.

Once in this gloomy period he came by to stay all night. He had just been called to an important church in a near-by town. It was quite a step for him—an acknowledgment of his zeal and talent; and he had come again to tell his mother and enjoy her proud smile. He hoped that he might see another face brighten a little also, but it did not.

He saw his father bent by toil, and sighed that he had worked so hard. The son had

been away some time and did not know all the sore spots in the family, but thought that his own life only was worrying the worthy man.

Incidentally he congratulated his sister that, now the old folks were so comfortable, she had in her marriage a possible outlook of relief from farm drudgery, and so on.

In his present indignation Bent Hickman turned, and the explosion came. He rebuked Ditmer stingingly, saying that the boy himself had been a failure—that his best success would always be a failure, and that he should rejoice now at his sister marrying another fair-handed failure was more than he cared to stand. He wanted no more of it in his house; and so—on and on to much worse.

But Bent had mistaken this boy, now a man, conscious of his calling. He forgot the stuff which was in him, coming from both sides; and the farmer found himself rebuked from a standpoint he had not thought of.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself, father. Frank De Lorne is a splendid, moral fellow—generous and brave, with the stuff in him to make any woman a good husband. He was my friend. You ought not to despise

any man that is poor, when God has blessed you so."

But hot strong words came back, and the outcome was that, in his high spirit, the boy went, silent and hurt, away from the house — out into a night of storm.

Nannie was not in when this occurred, and when she came, she got the impression that Bent had driven Ditmer out—for Laura sat crying and could not talk. The mother rose now like a tigress, for a moment, till she saw her husband, after slight remonstrance, bow his head and sob, as he took her scathing words; then she stopped.

There was little sleep that night, and two pillows were very damp. At breakfast there was only silence, and the food was gulped in lumps, and lay later undigested as a load of lead. Bent had business at once about the farm. Laura avoided her mother even. It was all too awful to talk about—too terrible to be unconscious of. They waited for time—one of God's great boons — to soothe and heal.

Nannie wondered where Ditmer had spent the night. She had thought of going over to some near neighbor and seeing if he had been

there. But all this would be too suggestive. She knew that she could not conceal her anxiety; and then she knew another thing: that in all that vast spread of homes there was not one where her boy would not be welcomed by every member of the family—except in his own—hers.

For days there was only such communication between Bent and the two women as was necessary to carry on affairs. There was a tacit agreement of silence on the sore subject. But the mother was not mollified. She had flown no flag of truce, though she showed no further aggressive resentment. When she heard that on next Sunday Ditmer would preach in town, a sort of farewell sermon before he left this region of his youth, she ordered *now* that the buggy be hitched up that day; and though it was lowering when Sunday dawned, she and Laura went in—not inviting the father.

Bent spent that day alone about the farm. He had often been left alone before, but nothing ever so purposeful as this had come at him. His conscience smote him; he knew he was not right, but to himself he would not acknowledge it, and he consoled himself with further resolves of stubbornness—queer, strong,

sordid things of folly. It was not anything mean; he would not hurt anybody. He *had* not hurt anybody. He had just said what he thought. Frank De Lorne might come; Laura might marry him; Ditmer might preach till doomsday, and come again. He had not forbidden any one the house; he wasn't going to. The whole thing might go to the devil. But some day they would hear from him — some day yet they would come pleading; if not, he didn't reckon any of them could keep him from making a will his own way. He wouldn't go to Dick to write it, either — he'd go to another lawyer.

Then he walked back to the house, his hands locked behind him, his head hanging, and he began to wonder if it were not a strange state of affairs when he should fear that Dick Ditmer might make him do right — when he should keep away from Dick for fear the right might be done.

Frank De Lorne soon learned of the state of affairs, and determined to beard the lion in his den. So he rode out regularly to see Laura, but he found a rather cool reception by the

mother, and the father ignored him altogether. He was graduated now and already known for some neat surgical work—was at home ripe for life, except that his practice was not established. He was, in this respect, scarcely ready to marry yet.

One morning Laura and Frank took a long ride together, and after she came back she said:—

“Mother, Frank and I have concluded that, since we are determined to marry, we had better marry soon, and to some extent relieve this terrible strain which I am causing the whole family. We do not want to run off. Frank is going to speak to father, though I’m awfully afraid for him.”

“Your father is not going to hurt Frank. You need not fear that.”

“I know, but—poor father, I do love him so, and dislike to pain him, and it is too sad to have him hate Frank. I’m sure he is honorable and brave. Would a boy want me—persuade me to marry him at my home (when I’d marry him anywhere), and then face Bent Hickman, and tell him frankly what he is going to do, if he were not honorable? Father hasn’t a thing

against Frank, except that he is poor and not a farmer. He just thinks he has. I should think Frank the kind of man he would like. Don't you love him a little, mother?"

And Nannie recalled some words which Bent had told her of:—

"God bless her. I love her because she loves you, Bent. That is enough for me."

And her heart went out warmly now toward the boy who had shown in every way that he loved her child; and she thought of that other woman—unknown and unchosen yet—who should sometime love her preacher boy, so grand and towering in his fearless fervor. Then into the unknown world of womanhood also her heart went out—feeling, praying, hoping.

The man and wife were retiring one night. This was the only time now when they met alone, or had much communication. They feared discussion and fought shy of long talks or long opportunities for communion.

"Bent, Laura thinks that I ought to tell you that she's going to marry soon. She thinks it best."

"Why don't she tell me herself?"

"She's afraid of you, I guess. I'm almost afraid of you myself."

This was a new sensation to Bent Hickman. It was what he had been striving for a little, but he did not enjoy it now that he had it. When had his child and his wife ever been afraid of him before?

"She thought that I had better ask your permission to marry here in your house—her home—she'd rather have it so, and Frank prefers it—suggested it even."

"Did you tell her that, if she marries that fellow, she'll never get a cent of my money?" he said firmly.

"No, but I think she knows it, or knows that you feel that way now."

There was quite a silence, and Nannie bit her lip and set her lower jaw in the old girlish way.

"I shall tell her that she can have her part of mine," she said finally—a very tempered firmness in her voice.

"*Yours?*" There was almost a sneer in the intonation.

"Yes, *mine*."

He looked her into the eye a moment, but she never quailed.

And the devil got deeper into Bent Hickman there at his own hearthstone than he had ever got before; took temporary hatred toward a child for his chair, the contempt for a wife for his footstool, and leant comfortably back and pillowed his head on sordidness and soreheadedness as a cushion.

"There is not a dollar of all this in your name," he said. "You've got—" He was about to say "nothing to show your claim." But an angel must have floated somewhere near, for his wife caught him up.

"But I've an honest man for a husband!" and he blanched as she smiled, and he thought how near he had come to throwing away the jewel of his life.

"Yes," he said penitently. "Forgive me. I did not mean— You have a half interest in it all. Do what you wish with yours."

"Bent, can that child marry at home?"

"I've nothing to say about it. You are the mistress of the house. I have never yet driven any one from it."

He rose early next morning and avoided his wife till breakfast, gulped that, and went out. A similar thing happened for other mornings.

As he went about he trembled at the narrow escape which he had made. He wondered if she would ever think just the same of him again—if she had jumped at that assertion to save him from himself. He believed that she had, God bless her. What if she had scorned him, as he deserved—he, a man who had always gloried that nothing yet had got between him and his honest debts—and stayed there long?

For an instant it maddened him that a little town upstart had come into his life—from a source that had so long been there, blighting all his plans—that this thing should have so nearly blasted his honor.

He looked up, and there, riding toward him, was a slight, well-poised figure. Frank had come to tell the farmer that he wanted to marry Laura.

“I do not expect your consent, Mr. Hickman. I know just where I stand in your estimation. I’m sorry. Some day I trust that you will see matters in a different light—at least I hope to live so that you will.”

The farmer was hammering on a shackling harrow at his feet, but he did not speak.

“I thought it best to tell you this frankly,

and that I want to marry your daughter in her home."

To save his life, Bent could not help liking this sort of straightforwardness. He looked up at this little fair-faced, weak-fingered fellow, standing there near him — big in his manliness, a giant in his love, — and he thought of his promise to Laura that day when they rode together. Frank had dismounted and was standing almost over him. But the good impulse was gone as the father thought of Laura's going, and he arose and said:—

"I don't want another son. The one I've had's been no comfort to me—and I don't want to get rid of my only daughter. She's been my comfort. I don't like your stock. She's over eighteen; I can't hinder her. Marry in the house—if you will marry, but remember that not one cent of mine ever goes to her or you."

"Your daughter's all I want. I will not believe that you intend to insult me by insinuating that any motive but love for her moves me. I will believe better things of you than to suppose that you are so engrossed in thoughts of wealth that you think that all others are

sordid and sinister. I love your daughter as you loved your wife. You did not marry her for money. I thank you for your courtesy."

The young man bowed and turned, putting his toe into the stirrup with his back toward the farmer; but as he sprang for his saddle, a heavy hand was on his shoulder, his foot slipped from the stirrup, and he missed his leap. He turned instantly with a scowl upon his face. The one he looked into was not angry, but it clouded also, and the great scar contracted in an instant, as the two stared at each other.

If that boy had smiled as he turned, this story would be shorter, for Bent Hickman's better angel had sprung an impulse in his breast, a fiery dart for good, but it spent itself in his touch, and was quenched in the young man's frown. How could he surrender to a pouting boy like that, when his own wife and daughter had not moved him?

"I was going to say something," he said, "but it don't matter— *Go ahead*, if you think there's no hereafter." And as he waved his hand houseward, he saw every bright shoe of that sorrel colt in alternate flashes, and it

seemed as if the horse even were shaking the very dust of these broad acres from his feet.

The matter was soon arranged between mother, daughter, and lover. The brother was to marry them. On a certain day Frank and Ditmer came out. No other woman stood by Laura that day, except her weeping mother, while Aunt Mima's old gray head was peeping through the dining-room door — crying, too, that her pet was going.

The father was out at the back of the farm, giving salt to his steers. Kate and Dick thought it better that they should not come, for Bent had never quite forgiven them that the young persons had met much at their home. Dick took no notice of it, but Kate sent her old friend word that while she had had nothing to do with it, she wished that she had. She added that she had once a little experience in uniting loving hearts, and always enjoyed it very much.

This absence of her husband threw a spell of gloom over Nannie, for Ditmer had said that he would not stay to-night — it was no time for

him to see father now; and he rode back to town with the bride and groom.

As Frank led Laura out, and Ditmer followed — fearing to stay because he was Frank's friend — it seemed to Nannie, the mother and wife, that so much of her happiness was going in that closed carriage; and her heart also, for the time, revolted against Frank that he should come into her home and cause all this trouble.

So poor Frank took his wife away without parental blessing — almost without consent. There was, he felt, just the absence of resistance. It was true that the mother followed them out to the carriage, and, when she had sobbed on Laura's and Ditmer's necks, she pulled her son-in-law down to her and kissed him, and begged him, with a choking throat, to be kind to her girl; but he felt that her caress was a bribe rather than a benediction — perhaps only a prayer. She said nothing to them about coming back, because she feared the coming. He went away, therefore, resolving that if he ever did come again it would be at a very special invitation indeed.

So Nannie turned into her desolate home,

her children gone, her husband changed—morose—souring, with so many sore, silent places in their lives, around which they shied as if they were moral quagmires into which they might plunge.

Through the tears of her distress she sought her Bible, as a duty at least if not as a solace. But she could not find her own copy. In searching behind some rows of books, she found another—old and well worn—and opening it she saw on the fly leaf the words:—

“And Bent, tell her that I bore you . . . but sometime . . . you will come again into life . . . another woman—her, I hope—bearing the travail of your second birth; and that as you have been worth it all to me, you will be worth it all and more to her some day—some day.”

She closed the book, arose, wiped her eyes, and went about her work.

XLVI

“ She said ‘No, he breaks better if he breaks of his own accord.’ ”

It was doubly galling to Bent Hickman that Laura should make her home within that of the De Lornes', and learn in the beginning all the extravagances which he believed they practised. But for a while, till Frank's outlook was better, this was necessary. With all his ill-feeling this father had not lost interest in his daughter, but his thoughts toward her at first were very bitter, and those toward her husband were scarcely utterable.

As the next year fled, he went about his farms overseeing, and was a little more dictatorial with his hired “hands” and a trifle harder on his tenants. Sometimes he loved to shut out his bitter moods by getting down to toil — fighting the earth an honest battle, and feeling that most satisfying thing, the consciousness of having accomplished something, along with the rest

which follows earnest labor. Work, however, made him stiff and unfit for overseeing.

In all this his mind went back to his *little* girl.

As he drove from farm to farm he thought of her as she had ridden with him, and had watched the horned lark sweep away in the wind, "like a fezzar." She had said cute things about the bee-martin, seeming so "tickled, tickled, tickled because he whipped the trow," and what a goose the flicker was that he did not have sense enough to turn back, as he flew from stake to stake before them. "His muver will be scared about him," she had said.

Now he never saw these old things occur that he did not wish that her prattle was again rattling on beside him.

When the hay was going up by more modern methods now, he thought of her sweet sun-red-dened face, as she had delighted to ride the horse and haul the shocks up to the stackers; and how she had always sought his approval with a searching smile, before she went back for another shock. When he strewed the hay on the frozen ground for the patient milk-cows, he heard her saying that the cow's spoon was her

tongue, and saw her going into ecstasies over the meek-eyed calves, and claiming every one of them. If he went into the loft, there were the same soft depressions in the hay, as if she had just romped there yesterday; and the hen's nest was in the same old place. He could almost see the little apron lifted to carry the eggs in to mother, again.

Nannie went in to see Laura, but the visits were usually short. When she returned there was always a message from the daughter to the father, but none was sent back from him to her. There was no hint that she should come home ever — no shadow of turning in him yet. If she had come he would have greeted her calmly — but he was not sending invitations out. The door was open. He had not driven anybody off, he mused.

The De Lornes had never had a daughter. Ralph was especially fond of girls, and Nannie's girl and Frank's wife were a wonderful combination to his sentimental nature. Laura was taken into his heart with all the affection and indulgence which he had given to his son, but with an added tenderness which the sturdi-

ness of a son rarely calls forth. Then they tried to compensate her for the loss of the approving presence of her own parents.

Laura was appreciative of all this. Bent heard of it—knew its origin and motive, and, now that he was hungering for her a little, it gave him a deeper pang. He felt that, not content with taking her, they were buying her affections—bribing her to stay; and these things did not soothe the smart of his own folly. He knew that their position was entirely logical. They might say that she was wholly their daughter now, since he had virtually repudiated her.

So her happiness was irritating him more and more. As in Ditmer's case, he had hoped that she might fail and come begging home again. But it was he himself that was a failure—a failure as a prophet. Few men are patient under such self-accusation. So he blamed every one indiscriminately, but especially Frank, that *he* had not failed, but was rising rapidly. And Bent Hickman's heart went hardening on and on.

One spring day he was raking leaves behind the smoke-house to make hens' nests of, and when the ground was bared, there were some

little rows of broken dishes, sticking out of the hard earth and glistening like white teeth; and here, at another stroke, this row bent off into a rectangle. He knew that he had uncovered the yard of one of Laura's playhouses, built here some other spring day in her little girlhood, when the sun was bright and warm.

He leant upon his rake a moment, and his eyes moistened, as he thought how often he had seen her stooping here, her face so hidden in her deep sunbonnet that she had to throw her neck far back on her shoulders before she could look up at him as he passed, and tell him that this was the gate and that the stiles and this sprig of cedar was the cherry tree, and the hole there was the well, and so on. Lord, he could hear her prattle to herself now, as she braced the spineless rag doll in a corner of a box, and soothed it down, or set it in an angle formed between a rough board and the wall! How frequently had he seen her here drive peg after peg with an old stave, as she made her picket-fence around her "darden."

He went away from it, out by the back fence, where the old ashhopper sat in tears of amber alkali, and he began raking there. But here soon

he pulled out a part of a little wagon, old and rotten, which he had once made for a certain little boy; and anon the rake clinked against a caster which had once been on his trundle-bed. He leant now upon the fence, and watched the man sowing oats broadcast in the orchard, and wondered awhile and walked into the house. Somehow, he knew not why, he felt that he would like to get a little closer to Nan just now.

He found her "rummaging" around in an old bureau drawer, and, before he could speak to her, she held up a golden curl at him — one of those by which two chubby arms had been stretched up to him one awful night — a curl that had hung upon his shoulder as he turned from his wife and wept.

He started toward her, and she suddenly suspended by its sleeves a tiny baby garment — a little short thing, so small that it did not seem that any human body could have ever lived within it, — a part of a certain little girl's wardrobe, which he had seen wrought out, night after night, with many a love-stitch, when tired eyes should have been resting — wrought out long before its little owner had come to claim it. He staggered for a moment, as if his wife might have struck

him, and then he went over and stooped and kissed her for the first time since — he could not remember when.

It was in her heart to ask him something: if he would not like to see these children in his home again, but she knew him, and said, "No. He breaks better if he breaks of his own accord," and she went on waiting, praying, living in her hope.

XLVII

“While some virtue had gone out to him from the hem of those baby garments, yet —”

MORE than once a week, after this, Bent Hickman had the habit of going into town — sometimes in one way, sometimes in another, but often he took a heavy wagon and spring seat, though he might have had a buggy or a spring wagon, if he chose. In his stanch age and substantiality the wagon seemed to give him such secure transportation.

He did not tell his wife so, but he took to driving past the De Lorne home — either going or coming — later both. One day Laura looked out from her upper room and saw him, and threw a kiss to him, and he bowed back stiffly, thinking of the folks below, and then he went just around the corner beyond and turned again toward home, his eyes not being just right to go up-town as a man among men.

"Why, Bent, you're back early," said his wife.

"Yes, went in for coal oil and forgot the can."

But she noticed that he went in the next day, and the next, now, and so on. Very frequently after that Laura saw him beneath her window, passing, and he had reached a condition where he could bow with ease to her now.

One day as he drove past she was not there evidently — her blind was down. Likewise he did not see her on the return. But the next day but one he came again and saw her sewing. She did not see him, but had her head bowed over her work, and he heard the snatches of a song and the hum of her machine, and saw hanging over the edge, outward, *a dainty sleeve* as if an arm, from some unseen realm of love, stretched out to him and beckoned—a little white sleeve so like the one at home.

He reached for his whip, and struck the nervous "off mare" a sounding thwack, which was very shockingly unusual to her; for she had been allowed lately to loiter at this point, and had always claimed her privilege. Now, as it was, she went prancing down the street,

and landed the dignified farmer in a very undignified manner upon the court-house square.

Here he hitched his team, and fairly trembled at his escape; for no impulse against his convictions — no temptation to break a resolution — had ever come to Bent Hickman more strongly, than that of leaving his team there in the street, and rushing into that house and up to his daughter's room. So he drove home by another way.

He did not tell his wife what he had seen, for he felt that she knew much of that; nor what he had done and thought, for he feared the weakness of his voice, and the powerful leverage her knowledge of his tenderness would give her. But when she came in from fastening up the chickens in their coops, she found things "all mussed up" in that bureau drawer; for he had hunted up that little garment, and had hung it on the machine — its arm hanging, reaching down — as he had seen the one in town; and he had kissed its little border as he hustled it away, at his wife's step upon the porch. Of course he could not put it away right, if he had hours at his disposal — what man can? — and he looked guilty when she

came in. Then she wondered! She did not know all, but knew enough to smile to herself and keep her counsel and hope on.

She noticed that lately when he went to town he rode in the spring wagon; and sometimes its bottom was strewn with the early June apples now ripening—a thing a certain little girl, once, and a big one later, was very fond of.

One day, when this had been oft repeated, he failed to see Laura as he went in, and he returned early in the hope that in the meanwhile she had come back; but she was not there; her blind was still drawn down. He drove on, and, turning a corner suddenly, met her walking alone, her hat so jaunty, her face so pretty, and a sweet solemn beautiful something in it which he had never seen there before.

For a moment, the baptizing scene, the turkey's nest, the early days of his married life, and his wife's own face—all blended into the thrill he felt now; and he stopped and said, as calmly as he could, with evident restraint:—

“Come here, Laura, father's got something for you.”

And she came as a little child, shying, fearing—hesitating in alternate upward glances and

lowered lashes—but trusting; and she peeped over behind the seat, whither her father had nodded, and was looking down. At the sight of the fruit she reached a quick hand with eager gasps of thanks; but, before she touched an apple, he grabbed her wrist with a terrible grip as if she were a thief that he was trapping. Scared and trembling, she looked into his face, and there was something terrible in it for an instant—in its purposeful determined joy; then he pulled her upward and she smiled, stepped on the hub, the tire, the wagon-box's edge, and into her father's arms amid a shower of tears and kisses.

Before she was released the team had started, and she was whirling homeward at an awful rate.

“Where are you going, father?”

“Going to take you home!”

“But, oh, father, they'll not know.”

“I don't care, I want to see you in my home again, I'm hungry for you—I'm—” And he burst into tears.

“But, father, I must go back.” And she arose, as the wagon ran.

“No, no, sit down,” and he drew her toward the seat.

“Father, I’ll jump out. It would so distress Frank and Father and Mother De Lorne. They will not know. I love you, father, but —”

“Yes — yes — God bless you — sit down. I have no right to you, but I do so want to see you on my farm again — my little girl once more before — before — Sit down, Dan shall drive you back at once. Yes, I swear it — sit down. They’ll never know till you’ve told them. Tell them that your old father stole you, abducted you, because — because, he loved you so, and wanted to see your sweet face in his home again.”

And she sat down, and they rode along gleefully, she reaching for those apples and he still driving rapidly, for they had small time to make the round trip in.

Aunt Mima heard the din of the approaching wagon’s rattle, and ran around the house, and said : —

“Fore de Lawd, why should Mahs Bent drive like dat?” and she strained her eyes, with her hand above them, as she walked out to open the gate. Then she saw better and said only : —

“Bress my soul! Hee-yah hee-yare! Mahs Bent has broke! Mahs Bent has broke!”

And Dan hobbled around the corner, mumbling:—

“Broke der debil! He’s wuff two hundred thousand d— Why, praise Gawd, look at dat!”

Nannie had heard the noise, but it was not so unusual for the “hands” to drive so, and the first thing she realized her husband walked in with a laughing, screaming bundle in his arms, and put it in a chair before his home hearth, now cool and “keeled” red; and he loosed his load just in time to catch the mother as she reeled.

“I’m not insane, mother—I’m just stolen, kidnapped by my own father, and home again—that’s all.”

But this did not help matters much with Nannie, and Bent made Laura explain. This also did not make things better either, and, for the first time since that baptismal tumble, she lost herself for a little while in her husband’s arms.

“Poor little mother! Poor little mother,” he said. “I should have told her,” and he rubbed her face and hands. “I did not know—I—I did not know myself—but—but I should have told her what I hoped—”

"And hungered for, husband?" feebly said a voice. "I *knew* — I knew all the time, Bent, for I knew *you*."

And they sat there, and could not talk for happiness, but said, "Well! well!" and reached to one another some caress or touch, till Bent arose and told Dan to hitch up the carriage. "I'll keep my promise, Laura!" he added.

But, as he saw her go away, and her sweet face fade as it nodded back beside the buggy bows, his heart rebelled that she had been taken from him without his consent. She was such a precious thing, that he would have enjoyed so much the giving of her — would have exulted that he had such a thing to give. Why could he not have had this, if he must be deprived of her?

And while some virtue had gone out to him from the hem of those baby garments, yet the little spring which had gushed a moment was soon absorbed into the sand.

Laura came again often, delighting him on her arrival and depressing him on her return. He saw her main interests were elsewhere, and again his moods were bitter and sad, and he soured on.

XLVIII

"And nestling . . . it drew his heart out through his cheek."

WHEN little Lilly De Lorne held her first reception in that upper room in town, and blinked her baby eyes in the November light, her two grandmothers vied with each other in doing her homage, and one grandfather fell down and almost worshipped at her pink toes, but the other was far out at home, "tending to things." His heart was anxious, so that he could scarcely eat his dinner, and in the afternoon he rode in to hear what he could upon the streets; but he was far, far from the point where he could go to that home for any purpose yet.

As the child grew she went with her mother, of course, out to the country home. Bent noticed her occasionally, and sometimes "techecked" to her, by smacking his tongue away from his teeth—more to please the mother than the little smiler that answered back with a broad

spread of her mouth. But, while she had the De Lorne eyes, which he did not like, this laughing showed the Ditmer dimple, which had sparkled at one time, as little lakes of light, in her Grandma Hickman's cheeks, but which were now just broader and deeper places in the age-cut lines. This baby's face was the only place where he could ever see these things again ; for Laura's cheeks were like his own — not dimpled. So he grew to like the game of calling these pretty dapplings of love and happiness up from the past, but he had never yet taken the little girl into his arms.

One day he came in, feeling pretty well, because all things were going on right about the farms ; and not knowing that Laura had come out, was surprised to find the baby on the "big room" floor alone, beating its little rattle. It stretched its arms to him in its loneliness, and smiled and gurgled. He picked it up, and it began to pull at his shaggy beard in a strange wondering way. Just then its mother came in from a moment's absence, and felt a queer sensation and a real embarrassment as she reached up for the child ; but it bent away from her with a smile and a little kick, and clasped the

old man's face, nestling its head against the scar! and it *drew his heart out through his cheek*.

As the little girl grew older and came out frequently, she shrieked and jabbered a pet name for him, when she saw him — an unintelligible something much like "Jojay"; and, as she toddled out into the yard, he often heard it, and quitting his work, he went to her, and rejoiced in the expectant flutter of her little arms and her eager glee, as she saw him coming. It happened one day that, when he passed Laura's window on his way home from town, that little Lilly saw him, and beat the window-pane and screamed "Jojay! Jojay!" so loud that *he* could hear her, and he waved his hand back at her. He saw her mother grab her away, as if she were doing wrong; and the window was dark a moment, and his heart fell, but just then the hall door opened, bright below, and they both came out radiant and happy in their greeting to "Jojay." And so Bent Hickman *halted* in front of the De Lornes' house.

He reached for the child, and she stretched her arms up to the tall spring seat, as her mother lifted her, and nestling to him again, she smiled back a sort of defiance at Laura. Then there

was a peculiar mischief-light in the old man's eyes.

"I'm going to take her home with me," he said.

"Oh, no, father, she's not dressed."

"'S'a pity about that, but it don't scare me!"

"But what will —"

"I'll bring her back in the morning."

"She'll be so much trouble to mother."

"Pity about that, too. Poor woman, never raised a baby."

"But —"

"Oh, no 'buts' about it!"

The child had reached forward, taking a line in each hand, and she flipped the right one above that nervous off mare, and the wagon was going, leaving the bewildered, yet delighted, hoping mother standing bareheaded in the street.

Later, on his trips in town, he would halt and beckon Laura out, but she would not always bring the baby down until she had made him beg awhile. She enjoyed having him plead, and hoped so much from this.

So it came about that he often took the little girl out when the days were fair. Sometimes he placed a cushion upon the pommel of his

saddle, and carried her before him as he rode. It pleased the child to "wide" thus; where she could cluck and strike and dig her little heels into the old horse's neck. This mode gave the grandfather a sense of possession which no other form of transportation did. In this way also she went about the farm with him as he oversaw his hands.

Later still, Laura kept herself and the baby both more out of sight — pretending often that she did not hear his call or see his beckon; and one afternoon, when she knew he was below there, she heard the door-bell ring and a well-known voice asking for herself.

No, he would not come in, he said to Mrs. De Lorne; he just wanted to see Laura a minute. Whereupon she came down, and he begged for the little girl again.

Thus it got to be a regular thing for him to call there for the child often, when the days were fair.

The little girl grew more and more delighted with her rural grandfather. She was his body-guard, his shadow; and caprices and frettings which he would not have tolerated in his own children, at this stage of their lives, he laughed

at now and revelled in, as showing, he said, the Hickman or the Ditmer spirit and firmness; and he forgot all his stern rules for bringing up children whenever Lilly's demands were made known. About the barn lots she rode astride his neck, drove him by his hair, whipped him, clucked to him, kicked him with her heels; and he bore it gleefully, and "bucked" a bit to provoke her childish laughter so near his ear.

One day in the fall, when he went in for her, Frank, answering his ring, met him at the door, and asked him respectfully to come in.

No, he only wanted the baby, *if THEY could spare her.*

Frank called up the stair that Grandpa Hickman wanted Lilly. Laura appeared at the landing, and said, "Do *you* think she is well enough, Frank?" and he said, "Yes." Then the merest bound of gratitude sprang in Bent Hickman's soul; and Frank himself handed her up to the older man. The farmer looked back as he left, and saw Laura and her husband standing there—her arm and head upon his shoulder; and a queer sensation of their sacrifice came into his heart as he bore their baby from them. Had any one ever taken Laura from him like that?

And there was another old, queer sensation very much mixed with the new.

When the farmer brought Lilly back this time, Laura and her mother-in-law were up-town and Frank away practising; so her other grandfather came out, and the farmer trembled and hesitated a moment, and then reached that "precious thing" down into the arms of Ralph De Lorne, and smiled a little, as the other asked him kindly to come in. No, he must be riding on.

Their paths had met a moment at a *single point*.

This was the last trip of the little girl that fall, for the blasts of winter began to blow a chill over all the earth, and over Bent Hickman's heart as well, at the absence of this softening presence. The season was hard and long. Laura could get out with the baby only once or twice in the severe cold or terrible mud; and the little tattoo at the pane of her own room in town, with the frost-formed blur of her baby breath upon it, and the wave of his own mittened hand at her from the street, was the larger part of their communication now.

But when the spring came, she was often with

him again. She could follow him around now, and ask queer questions and say quaint things which amused his fancy and delighted his heart.

He had duplicated in his home many of her city toys, and was so extravagant that he was inclined to chide himself. One day Laura said to him, firmly :—

“You’re spoiling the child, father. I’m sure you never treated me this way.”

But he only chuckled, and planned new joys and surprises for his darling. At another time, however, Laura was severe and indignant with him, and told him that he was needlessly indulgent—even worse than Grandpa De Lorne! Then he snatched his hat, went out, and had very conflicting feelings in his breast. He had some sore places about being rebuked by his own child in his own house; and then, to be compared to a De Lorne in anything—especially in extravagance, and the spoiling of a child! Maybe he was getting old. He had heard that old men were indulgent with their grandchildren.

Before he came back into the house he went to town, and when he returned he found Laura about to leave. The little girl ran to him in

her joy, and searched his pockets for the usual things. When he saw her pucker her little lip in her disappointment, he picked her up, tossed her high into the air, caught her as she came down, laughing through her tears, and he bade Laura leave her with him, saying that he would bring her home to-morrow afternoon. Before the mother could protest, he was gone with the child; so Laura went into town without her.

Over on a brushy knoll of "post-oak scrub" in the woods pasture, old Beck, the favorite Chester White sow, had heaped a snug home of leaves and "fodder stalks," as if this season were winter and this country were in the arctics; and here were some of the cunningest little pigs, which Lilly would give her breath to hug. More than once she had seen them, and coveted one—just one—of them; but grandpa had said that little pigs were not good for little girls. Now, in his penitence, he took a bushel basket, put some ears of corn in it, set Lilly under its arched handle, and, stooping under many a limb to save the curly locks the fate of Absalom's, he brought her again that he might see her ecstasies about the pigs.

Of course she wanted one, as usual, but she

said, repeating his own words, "But iddly pids is not dood for iddly dirls, is dey, danapa?" And he saw her little breath flow tremulously as she set this repression on her own fluttering hopes. He admired this bit of "stuff" in her make-up, here in her babyhood, and his conscience smote him that he had disappointed her once that day. So that when Lilly came back to the house a little pig came with her.

Grandma Hickman nearly drew the line at making a pigsty out of her house—even to please the baby; and when, the next morning, she saw Lilly kissing it as she hugged it up, Nannie sent it back to its mother while Bent was out. Although things looked a little stormy when the farmer came in and the baby awoke, yet the pig stayed "at its muzzer's house," as Lilly phrased it; and that afternoon Bent took the little prattler into town, while she delighted in the fiction that she was "anuzzer iddly pid doin' bat to its muzzer."

XLIX

“‘Go in, God bless you, I’m counting on you.’”

FOR a while Bent Hickman was a busy man, not going often into town; and, when he did go, he saw no one at De Lorne’s as he passed. One day, however, he met Dick, who said:—

“Laura’s little Lilly is quite sick.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Don’t know; doctors don’t seem to know.”

Bent had scarcely gone on a rod, in his own eagerness to see some doctor—for they had all been there—when he met Frank, with an anxious and haggard face—so anxious that it stopped the farmer, and he asked about the child.

Frank answered him rather professionally—more as a physician, Bent thought, than as a father. It was a queer fever, the young man said. It did not run on as the ordinary intermittents or remittents, and yet there was no sign of enteric disturbance—no typhoid symptoms—he added, as he saw Bent’s face appear

bewildered. Quinine and the other antipyretics had no effect upon it. He was much puzzled; and so on.

Although Bent Hickman was sorry that his pet was suffering, yet his old feeling got a sort of consolation out of Frank's discomfiture. Perhaps he was a failure after all.

This in the rich soil of all that deep affection — *this* here and now.

He guessed it was only a cold. Cold fevers often puzzled doctors. He would bring Nannie in, and she and the other grandmother would soon cure the baby.

Next day Nannie came, and stayed, for the child grew rapidly worse. Bent rode by in the afternoons, and his wife ran out to tell him tidings of the little sufferer. There was an air of dread and awe about the whole street for blocks. Neighboring women came in with solemn mien and shawls over their heads, and whispered on the front porch, and followed each other out to the front gate as one left before the other. Men, going home from the labors of the day, halted and waited till they saw some one to ask how the baby was. She had been a great favorite, and had often beaten

the panes with her tiny palms, and kissed her dainty fingers to many as they passed; and tired laborers had found their hearts cheered by the bright face at the window. Up-town, the first question of the day was, "How is little Lilly De Lorne this morning?" and the old doctors shook their heads and said, "Temperature 104 and 5 — sometimes 6 — remitting temporarily in the cold bath only." To the same question Frank always replied, "She's alive yet, and we are still at work."

So it ran from day to day. The suspense, even to the community, became awful. The little form was wasting, the little wail was weakening, and still the fever burned.

At last Bent Hickman, who knew and felt all this, could stand the strain no longer. He rode out home one afternoon, and later in the dusk rode back, tied his mare at the De Lorne post, and went in, walking unannounced into the gaunt little sufferer's room. He was shocked at the havoc wrought in that sweet form. He saw tears spring into the eyes of his wife and Laura at his presence; and even in this distress mother and daughter shot a happy glance at each other.

As he bent an instant over the little frame — almost a skeleton — he found her in one of her conscious moments, and she feebly stretched her arms, and in a little wail said:—

“Tate Lilly, danapa!”

And he broke down, and left the room. He would have given a farm if he could have picked her up a minute.

He stole back after a while, controlling himself now — keeping out of Lilly’s sight, as Nannie told him he had better do. Frank was not in at that other time, but now he was there, devoting every thought and look, every movement, to the baby; meeting every moan or toss of the aching form with some delicate soothing attention. All the others gave way to him when he approached. It was some time before he saw the farmer, and spoke to him respectfully and apologetically, offering to take his hat.

“No, I’ll be going directly.”

But Bent did not go. He only sat there and suffered with his darling and twirled his hat. He even allowed Suze, his favorite mare (whose nervousness had helped him to steal this little girl from her mother on that day), to stand

hitched all night—a thing he had believed he could never do.

When dawn came the baby was a little quieter, Frank was sleeping a bit, and Bent stole out and rode home “to see things tended to.”

As he went he thought of that young doctor. He saw him watchful and considerate of Laura, kind and respectful to Nannie, and his whole soul where his own was—in that baby. He had never seen this father with his child before, except as he had reached her up to himself that time and stood gazing after her. He wondered now how Frank could have done that—she seemed so precious; and the grandfather marvelled further that with all this boy's evident affection, he was so cool—had himself in such command—under this distress. There must be “stuff” in him somewhere, he could not help admitting; and when he recalled how Frank could soothe the baby with the delicacy of his touch, it began to dawn on him that perhaps a smooth, white, slender-fingered hand might have a mission after all.

It was more than dark when he rode in again next evening; for even yet he did not like for

everybody to see his horse tied at De Lorne's. No, he would not hitch there at all this time. He would go on up and leave Suzé at a livery stable. His wife met him at the door when he walked back, and said it was not best that he go into the baby's room just now. She was awake and fretful, and he might excite her. They went, therefore, into the parlor, and bent their heads together there and wept at the gloomy outlook. Shortly she arose and left him alone.

In the next room he heard, through a door slightly ajar, a half-dozen doctors holding a consultation — that awfulest of conclaves, in which the patient's fate seems, like a tennis ball, to be bandied back and forth between the rackets of ponderous words, and where, to a layman, the stilted politeness of the occasion is all so gaunt and ghostlike. In the midst of this it was a relief to hear the blunt voice of an old physician, who had come out to see Laura and saved her one time when she was sick : —

“I tell you, gentlemen, the trouble is septic. That child has come in contact with some animal poison, has she been in the country lately? It is wonderfully like anthrax, and —” But some one shut the door!

Then an old man in that parlor reeled a bit, and caught at the back of a chair, and crept around and fell limply into it.

All night long there was a deeper agony in his face, as he sat in the sufferer's room and twirled his hat. He would have given worlds if he could have helped. But he saw that there were better hands and cooler heads there than his; so he sat and prayed and trusted.

As Frank moved about the room, this older man turned his head to follow him, and the thought came to that grandfather, "If *I* suffer so much because of *my* love, what must this *father* be feeling?" and he recalled how he had felt that time when Laura was "low," and the other doctors had given her up, but that old doctor of blunt speech had saved her.

So he began to believe in this young father, because he not only loved, but had made his love so practical. Had *he* himself failed at this? Was he a failure at last and this boy a success? God help him, he believed he was.

And God help so many of us who can and do love, but cannot utter it in deeds, or will not; who do not project our love into the great empty realm of love's need.

Again before breakfast he started home. Uncle Dan was watching, to open the gate; for when the farmer rode horseback, he came in another way. This gate had its rear "upright" hinged at its upper end within the crotch of a wooden fork whose tines were nailed astride a scraggy oak; and its lower end rested in a cup cut in a projecting root. It was fastened with a pin, worn slick by long and constant use. The gate dragged rather than swung; and the old darkey had strained at it often to let the farmer in as he had brought the baby home on his pommel.

A sickening suspicion was haunting Bent Hickman now. Before Dan could ask how the baby was, the farmer said:—

"How's everything this morning, Dan—Ur— How—how's—the hogs?"

"Why," said the other, as he strained at the gate, "some—of um's—not—well."

The rider had wheeled his horse, and was facing the black man now with eager attention.

"Beck—she—wouldn't—confound dis pin, I can't make it stick—Beck she—there, now it sticks—wouldn't—eat her cawn, and two of

her pigs — [looking up] why, great Gawd — what's the matter, Mahs Bent? Is *you* sick?"

"I've been up all night," he replied, and as his heels struck the ground in dismounting he staggered back, and the faithful servant caught his arm and straightened him up — taking the reins quickly as they were dropped.

Without a word the farmer climbed a fence and strode off toward the post-oak knoll, and there lay Beck stupid beside her bed, and two of her pigs — *one of them the baby's pet* — were dead, their pink skins *pustular with disease*.

When Bent Hickman knew himself again, he was ordering Dan to saddle Prince. This was the old horse on which he had always brought the baby out, and the faithful man absent-mindedly put the cushion about the saddle. But its touch now was needles in the farmer's soul.

Again he found the doctors in consultation. The door was open now. He would wait till they were through and tell them what he knew — what he had done — tell them if they jeered at him, if they and Frank spat in his face. But just then he heard Frank's voice and listened. The boy was setting forth his views coolly, yet

with a half-pleading, half-hoping tone that the others might agree with him. There was a deep-seated abscess, he was sure, which, he believed, could be opened externally with a lancet.

Bent heard no murmur of assent, but he heard Frank ask Dr. J. if he would not try it; but he said, "No, let Dr. D. do it;" but Dr. D. said that he was old, his hand unsteady, "Let Dr. M. or some younger man attempt it."

Thus it passed around till both Frank and that other interested listener knew that this politeness cloaked unwillingness simply, at best a want of hope. Death after an operation is not a good advertisement for any doctor.

"Then I'll do it myself," said the boy. "It's the only hope."

"Better try an exploring needle first," said one, cautiously.

"No," Frank replied. "Her heart is too weak to tolerate chloroform. She shall not suffer more than I can help. I am confident enough to risk a knife."

As he turned away so determined—the others following, with distrust in their every

feature, Frank was almost upset by the grasp of a strong arm upon his own, and a whisper at his ear, exulting in its huskiness :—

“Go in, God bless you! I’m counting on you.”

It was a solemn scene a few minutes later in that chamber of so much suffering. The mother and the grandmother had been prevailed upon to retire. A wasted form lay upon mamma’s sewing table—the sleeve of the little garment slipped off and hung outward, empty, reaching.

The basin and the lancet were there in all their metallic glint, along with sponges, cotton wool, and the many hints of more suffering. The doctors stood about with solemn mien, moved softly, and spoke in low-pitched suggestions. One cleansed the flesh with antiseptics, another packed absorbent cotton underneath, while, on the outer edge of the circle, two old men, doubly interested in the sufferer and the surgeon, drew nearer each other with a common hope—drifted together with a common dread.

A lithe, shirt-sleeved figure stepped forward,

bent over the little frame, laid the fingers of the left hand upon it, tapped them as they moved here and there with the ends of those of the right hand, turned an ear to listen; then he tapped again, made a blue pencil mark at this point upon the shrunken skin, felt for a projecting bone here and marked that. It was easy to note the veins and arteries now as they lay visible, in the flabby flesh.

At last two fingers treaded in alternate pulses, as a pianist plays pianissimo — only more softly still, as if a brain lay in each tip, and taking up the steely thing, this young father like another Abraham, stood, for the merest instant, in a cool pose above his child. Then there was just the faintest sweep of the left hand up the right arm, to feel that the sleeve was clear, when, quick as the thrust of a bird's beak, the lancet had gone and come — followed by a viscous gush of yellow pus.

Some one caught the boy as he staggered back; exclamations of surprise, groans of relief, and words of congratulation escaped; and when Laura rushed in, at the little baby scream, she knew by the doctors' faces that there was hope, and she saw two old men grasping each other's

hands and almost weeping upon each other's necks. *Their paths had merged.*

In a few moments, when all was quieter, one of these laymen turned to the physicians and diagnosed their case.

L

“‘No, I was not right, and that’s why I am talking to you now.’”

THE citizens of the little county town had got up a Fourth of July celebration, not in patriotism purely, but because it was the thing to do to advertise their wares, to keep the people from going off to other towns with rival trading facilities.

There were to be the usual things, along with the political re-hashing of history and the serving of warmed-over editorials of the city press, in speeches made by men “working purely for the party.” But as a sort of compromise to good citizenship and a sop thrown to the few who believed and hoped and did not always rail or whine, the committee of arrangements had invited a celebrated divine of St. Louis to address the crowd — allowing him to choose his own theme. He had written that he would be glad to come.

He was a man noted for his oratory, for his

wit, humor, broad views, wise counsel, and an enduring love for his fellow-men, expressed in all his labors. Bent Hickman knew him, for when a humble circuit rider this preacher had tarried often in his mother's home and had been a benediction to her, coming miles to see her in her final sickness; and once since, not long ago, the farmer had heard him anew, and had marked how he had grown and broadened. So he determined to hear again this grand man on this day.

But it so happened that a few days before the Fourth, this preacher saw that he could not deliver this address, and he looked around to find a man to take his place—to do his work, as he had hoped to do it—to pipe his message—phrase his mission to this people in the spirit in which God had given it to him. His choice fell upon a young minister, not of his own denomination, but of that people whom, in his youth, he had fought as dissenters and stigmatized with opprobrious names.

This young man had charge of one of the largest congregations of his people in the city, and was bigger than his creed, though his personal confession was large—was broader than his

church, though that was broadening daily. Weekly a throng hung on his words, as he spoke as one having authority from on high — a thing felt if not confessed; and the daily journals sought his views and printed his words upon great ethical and economical themes. His labors touched everything that needed, and he was one of those that believed wherever he went he could take Christ, and that he had no business where Christ could not go.

A sweet-faced woman had come recently and stood by his side, as he fought farther upward and conquered with his Master's sword, and she brought her fortune that he might not need, and stretched her hands in support of his that he might not fail.

In the country, there was another sweet-faced woman — sweet yet in time-cut lines — *his* mother, to whom letters of affection had never ceased to come; and the wife at his side sent clippings of his sayings and printed copies of his sermons and love messages to both parents far out on that prairie farm. And that mother's heart had surged toward that woman whose face she had never seen; and she left these letters, clippings, and sermons lying around; and, com-

ing in suddenly sometimes, she had seen a pair of riding-bow spectacles snatched quickly from a rough, large, character-hinting nose, which must often be blown with a very sonorous snort to make it entirely comfortable when she came.

Bent Hickman and his wife had not heard of any change in the programme for the glorious day, and they went early to hear the favorite Methodist man. He was one of a few preachers in whom the farmer did not think that good material had been wasted. They took a copious supply of dinner, that they might feed their friends and their friends' friends, for there was not nor had there ever been anything stingy in either of them in this respect.

Long before the address, he and she were packed on the hard planks near the stand, up to which almost from Bent's toes ran a rude flight of steps. Behind them was an eager, perspiring throng, anxious for the beginning.

Much of the lighter things of the programme had been carried out, and Bent, in the heat, had risen and pulled off his coat and had sat down again, and laid it across his knees. The chairman of the committee arose, and said that, as

the orator from St. Louis had not yet arrived, they would have to vary the programme a little, till the train came ; and he introduced one of the political malcontents of the times.

As this place-hunter wailed and howled and pounded the desk of rough plank before him till the pitcher of ice-water splashed over and the tumbler danced, Nannie heard the engine whistle, in the old view of her girlhood days when here at school, and she saw the white steam down the distance, and felt a thrill, she knew not why, as if it came to her, was throbbing with her hopes, as she had seen it come that day with Dick.

The tiresome speaker had not yet finished when she saw a closed carriage dash past and go around behind the stand ; and her heart grew faint, as she thought of that other closed carriage, which, on that awful day, had borne her boy and girl from her. The girl was back. Would he ever come ?

At last the tiresome speaker closed, and the chairman arose and said that Dr. Morden, of the Blank Street Methodist Church, St. Louis, could not be with them as he hoped, but had sent a young and talented friend of his, the

Reverend Mr. Ditmer Hickman of the Blank Street Christian Church, who was not unknown to them, since he had grown up in their midst, and was the pastor of the largest congregation of his people in the West; and so on in high complimentary phrases.

"The Reverend Mr. Hickman will now address you."

And there arose from somewhere behind the stage-posers who sat in front, a man — no longer a youth — a man with a man's face, limned in lines of study, alive with thought and force, flashing with feeling and expression.

"I am here to-day in the first place because I love John Morden," he said, calling his Methodist brother's name. "I am not going to apologize for not being able to fill his place, since I rejoice that I have this opportunity of trying to do his work. I congratulate myself, as I pity you, that I may stand in his stead for a little while, and feel the mantle of your expectation of him and your good will for him — feel the impulse of all that he hoped to do for you to-day — fall upon me."

Nannie reached out under the coat and slipped her hand into a rougher one beneath it, and

found an answering pressure in its clasp. The speaker was glancing far out over the great throng, looking for them, but had not seen them yet.

“As your chairman (and my friend) has said, I am not a stranger to you. On your own prairie I was born, and I have romped over your fields, rolled in your yards, and eaten at the table of some of you; and your latchstring was always out to me. It was to you that I came first with my poor attempt to give men the message of God, and your patience bore with me as I struggled to help you, but *you* helped *me* the more. If I stand here to-day, in the room of one who has been compelled to disappoint you; if I am bettered so that I may dare to stand; if I can say anything that may help you *now*, it is because, for one thing, that with your kind faces, your prayers, and patient listening you helped me *then*.”

“Lord,” thought Bent, “what a little part I’ve had in all this.”

“Out there on that broad, rich prairie,” continued the speaker, “there are two others only who are ahead of you in my building — a strong, stern, honest man, who strove with toil as I

studied and spent his substance, and another, an angel-faced, sweet-voiced woman, who loved and hoped and trusted *God*, and believed in *me*. After them I belong to you by right of discovery and development, as we proudly say of our country, whose glory we celebrate to-day. I am the product of your soil, and my heart goes out to you in my words, and my love for you will abide."

Then he was gone into his theme. As he looked down, beneath his feet, almost, there were two forms whose faces he could not see. The head of one hung over like a flower wilted, and that of the other lay shocky and tousled between two rough hands—the elbows on the knees.

The speaker did not soar in sound; he struck in words of thought, hot and burning, in phrases apt and piercing, and men beat their palms together back at him, as if this were a battle and he a champion whom they would like to follow. He "assailed wrong practices" in politics, in trade, in everything, from a new standpoint with one breath, which seemed almost blighting, and breathed a mist of charity for frailty and error with another. He set high

ideals in one sentence, and commended lowly, honest effort in another. If, as he glanced at one part of his audience, he drew a figure from the skies, where God sat alone, he turned his face later toward another part, and instanced metaphors from the plough or spade or growing grass or herds, or from scenes where men lived and loved together.

Fans ceased to flutter, loungers crowded closer up, and even the silly outer groups of courting young people stopped giggling and showed some interest at the burning sentences, condemning wrong. Men shouted "Good! good!" as if the cause were partisan, and they forgot their creeds, their parties, their woes, and discontent, and grew grateful—helped by these cheering words; grew penitent at these warning, yet love-burdened, phrases; grew broader at these charitable interpretations—liked each other better, reached for each other's hands or sought for each other's approving smiles and nods.

Two men, who thought that they were enemies, and had "not spoken" for years, jostled each other as they strove to hear, and they turned to apologize, and smiled in each other's faces.

"John," said one, in a rough whisper, "how are you? Blamed if I can keep from speaking to you any longer while a feller talks like that."

"How are you, Bill?" — stretching his palm. "Glad to see you. You and me been actin' the fool a little, ain't we?"

At last the speaker was nearing the end. He had carried his audience into heights of hope by his optimistic words. "Some of these men behind us," he said, "doubtless think that if their party does not succeed, the State is gone; but they forget that the family is the State. And nowhere is this family more like God would have it than in these rural regions of our own great State."

Then he was gone again in a flight — a picture of a model family where harmony and affection mingled, children were loved, parents were respected, and toil and suffering were requited in gratitude and obedience, "and — and — uh — ah, God — smiles — and —"

He stopped — stuttered — his voice slipped — he bit his lip and shook as if a spasm had struck him; for he had looked down near by, and a pair of faces, love-lit, brightening, swallowing his every word, were gazing up at him, one with

almost a halo of pride and happiness about it, and the other softening and glowing with swimming eyes and an exulting joy!

The orator turned another way and tried to speak again, but clapped his handkerchief to his face and broke down.

Before he could turn to his seat, he found himself in an embrace, as if a bear had grabbed him. Men shouted, women sobbed, and all strove to leave their seats. But Bent Hickman stretched his arm a moment, and they were silent.

"I must apologize to you," he said, "for my impulse on this occasion—this interruption. If I am the unconscious cause of it, I am the cause also of this speech which you have heard; but I deserve no credit for it, for I did all I could to keep this boy upon the farm, and make a mere money-getter of him. I thank God to-day that I failed. I thought it spoiling good material to make him such a man as he is. Was I right?"

"No! no!! NO!!!" shouted a hundred voices.

"No, I was *not* right, and that's why I am talking to you now. If this boy had not made this public acknowledgment to you of what he

claims that he owes to me, I should not have risen; but I could not let this credit pass when I did not deserve it, and when I knew that many of you knew that I did not. It was not my own. I could not take it, and do him and myself — do you this wrong. Many of you are my neighbors. You know the story: One night my boy chided me for my sordidness — spoke his message to me fearlessly, as he has to you, to-day, as God had inspired him — and I insulted him. I did not drive him from my home — no — no — thank God for that; but he went, and now I do not blame him for the going. But my heart then did not go with him. His mother's love and prayers followed him, and, as you have heard him say, you yourselves have helped him; but I — God help me — had no part in this building — which I am so proud of here to-day.

“In your applause and appreciation I could take no part, but I hung my head in shame, while the rest of you clapped your hands at my boy's success. I want to join you now, though I do not deserve it. I ask it only as a favor — not a right. Can I? Can I? What do you say?”

And a wild shout of enthusiasm went up, and

a strange fair face behind "the boy" leaned forward on his shoulder and glowed with joy.

The older man could not say another word, but broke down and left the staging with many a rough palm stretched to him and some watery eyes gazing kindly into his own.

It was a happy dinner which was spread that day upon the tangled bluegrass sward, with Nannie's eyes so red and her appetite all gone; and it was a happy quartet that sped later, in that spring wagon, through clouds of dust, out into the cool breezes of a certain prairie home.

LI

“‘Bent,’ said Nannie, chokingly, ‘*I* knew — I knew you all the time.’”

ONE August day, after little Lilly was well again, Bent had Frank and Laura, Dick and Kate, out to his farm for dinner. He was not at home when they arrived early, but they heard a gun-shot back of the barn, and Nannie said that it was his, and that he would be in soon. Finally he came, swinging, by its legs, a dead crow.

“Why, father! what are you going to do with that?” said Laura.

“Make a meal of him.”

“Oh, hush, and tell us why you killed it.”

“Well, he was watching a hen’s nest, waiting to get the egg.”

“Why did you bring it to the house?”

“Like the soup!”

“Stuff!” she said, stamping her foot in the old childish way which he liked so well.

"Lilly, *you* ask him. Maybe he'll tell you."

"Dampa, what you doin' do wif 'at trow?"

"'Doin'' to eat him, honey — swallow him whole — feathers and all."

That was all they could get out of him, and he hung the bird in a cherry tree and took his gun into the house.

It was a magnificent spread of all the good things which a Mississippi valley farm only can produce in all their cheapness, abundance, and freshness; and this country air, though it was so sultry now, furnished the best of sauce for their consumption. Frank was not quite so easy as he would like to be, and it seemed to him that "Mr. Hickman" did not take any special pains to make him feel at home.

After dinner Bent and Dick strolled out together and came in later laden with watermelons. The ladies came out with case-knives, and they all grouped themselves under the shade of the cherry trees upon the sod, and the crimson half-moons grew crescent in green and white, as these two old boys, scorning an implement, went into the fruit with what Lilly called their "teef."

Finally Bent, when all were done, reached for the crow near by, and said:—

"You want to know about this crow, Laura. I've been living off of crow and some things much better, lately. You've no idea how good crow is when it's seasoned right. I really like it with other things, and I've saved this little treat for myself till now. I won't say even that this is my last mess."

He lifted the dead bird up, and looked at it a moment, with all their faces turned wonderingly toward him. After a little he broke out suddenly — looking at his wife: —

"Nannie, I've sold the Clifton farm!"

"Why, Bent! that was a favorite."

"Yes, but Simpson wanted it — paid me a good price. Besides, I needed a little cash."

"Well, well!"

"And I've bought the Hampton place in town."

"Why, I never!" said his wife.

"Oh, father!" said Laura, "and you and mother are —"

"Going to live there!"

"Think of that, Lilly, Grandma and Grandpa Hickman in town!"

"There was another house close to it that I liked and looked at. Maybe some of you know it — the Hinton home."

"Why, yes! the prettiest place in town, but you couldn't buy that," said Laura.

"Well, I don't know! After he's built and furnished it, his health has broken down, and he's got to go West. Met me yesterday and asked if I knew any one who'd like to put so much money in a home — furniture and all."

"What did you tell him?" said Kate, interested. She and Dick had been contemplating a change.

"Told him I thought I did."

"Who?" said Dick, eagerly, raising on an elbow.

"His name is Hickman. I bought it."

"Why, Bent," said his wife, "we can't live in two houses."

"We can by proxy, I reckon."

"How's that?" said Kate.

"It's deeded to Frank De Lorne and his wife — tenants in common. It's Lilly's home," he said, throwing away the crow and grabbing up the child. "*I* expect to be there a 'dood deal' myself, and it's large enough for another 'dampa' to *bide* in, if he'll come."

As Frank started to spring to his feet, the same strong grip was on his shoulder that had

been there twice before, and it bore him down now.

"Not a word, Frank! Don't interrupt the orator. I'm not quite done yet with that crow, if I did drop him for this girl. In all this I am just paying my honest debts. It's a funny practice you've been having. Your uncle Dick 'll be jealous of you. This is a sort of doctor's bill and lawyer's fee combined; for your skill kept me from ever judging myself a murderer — though, of course, I meant no wrong.

"Now," he added, as he saw Laura inching nearer him, "here goes the whole bird: I thought once, Frank, that you were a failure, that your hand was too fair and dainty, and I despised you for this — and — and — other things; but now, if you will let me, I'd like to take it — the one which held the lancet, you know — into both of mine a minute."

"Old boy," said Dick, laconically, "you are coming to a head."

When Laura let her father loose, Kate rose and rushed at him, pounding him with the soft edge of her closed hand.

"You old scamp," she said, "I had begun to

fear that I did not know you, but you *are* Bent Hickman, *aren't* you?"

"Bent," said Nannie, chokingly — not able to get up — "I knew — *I knew* — I KNEW YOU ALL THE TIME!"

* * * * *

So Bent Hickman and his wife left toil and worry and moved to town; and on pretty days two men, a little beyond middle life, may often be seen walking together — each with a rough finger ringed by a moist dainty palm, each with a heart linked to the other by the bond of a common love — *their paths running onward side by side.*

THE END.

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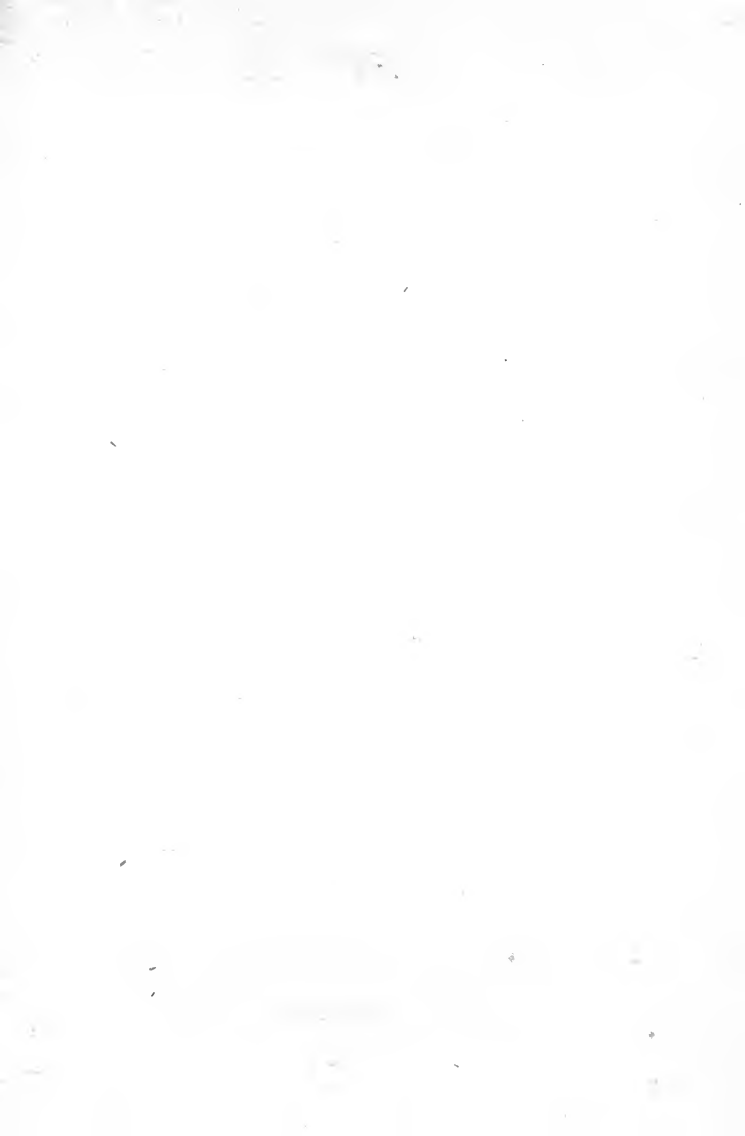
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